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Beyond the Gates

Michelle Chin

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in English and Creative Writing
under the advisement of Margaret Cezair-Thompson

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Mom, Dad, Daniel, and Nonnie—thanks for being the home where I find my shelter. I am so grateful for the countless hours I wrote beside you all. I love you so much.

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Michelle Chin

I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.
Psalm 61:4

Chapter One

The giant iron gate marked how far I could be from my dorm without getting in trouble. I liked how it towered over me when I sat beneath it, the sharp rods almost poking the clouds for attention. I made sure not to touch it, so my hands wouldn't smell like metal. But it wasn't easy. A rusty green lock bolted the gate shut. It was larger than both my fists combined, and its key hole almost looked like a heart. Well, a lopsided upside down one. I wondered if I could shake it until it came undone. It had been decades since this gate was used as the entrance to RISE Academy. It was time for it to be opened again.

Every day after dinner I came here and peeked through the bars, pretending that the red brick building I lived in with fifty other girls was a prison, and I had to plan my escape route. I would imagine myself climbing up the evergreen, barely escaping being prodded by the iron tips, and leaping onto the bush five feet from the property border. I'd dart through the rows of residential streets until I made it to Central Square. I'd see the top of St. Paul's Church pointing up like a tent and run in that direction, because right next to it would be the Number 1 bus that would take me to Back Bay. I'd jump on, tap my Student CharlieCard, and in 25 minutes, I'd be home. The brownstone would have never looked so warm on a chilly autumn day. Kicking off my shoes at the door, I'd go and plop onto my parents' bed and hide underneath their squishy white comforter. I wouldn't have to worry about them catching me, sending me right back to my boarding school, because they'd probably be in Singapore. They'd just be waking up, sending me a good morning text as I fell asleep in their bed.

But tonight, this wasn't going to happen. There'd be no touching the imposing gate, no going home, and no sleeping in my parents' bed. They wouldn't send me a good morning text, because they weren't in Singapore. They were in Chicago—unusually close by, but they'd been

going to the company headquarters there a lot in the past few months. They told me they'd call me at 7:00 PM Eastern, right after my dinner and right at the start of open dorm time, better known as loud hour.

Every loud hour I used to stay next to my Parisian roommate whose name was Brooklyn Boucher. Apparently, her parents once went on a vacation to New York where they got in a traffic jam on the Brooklyn Bridge and started arguing about commitment and other adult things. By the time they had reached the end of the bridge, they were engaged, and they remembered this moment with such rose-colored glasses that they named their daughter after it.

Anyway, all loud hours just involved Brooklyn recounting the seventh-grade gossip to Ned Stackhouse, a British international student whose accent Brooklyn had immediately latched onto. I used to stand there and listen, continually adjusting and readjusting my knee highs—I didn't have any gossip to add to these two's sensational conversations. Eventually I talked so little that Brooklyn asked me, "Did you forget how to speak English? Why don't you go and talk to the other Chinese students?"

English was the only language I had ever spoken. I never liked loud hour.

I checked my phone. 7:02 PM. My parents hadn't called yet. I considered calling them, but if they had gotten held up in a meeting, they wouldn't appreciate the distraction. I started to pick grass from the ground, letting the green pieces fall onto my navy plaid skirt. It was getting chilly and dark out, so I rocked myself back and forth. Then I started humming along to "Eleanor Rigby" by the Beatles, just like my dad and I used to sing together before he started to travel a lot for work a few months or so ago. Before that, only my mom worked and traveled a lot.

I liked it then. When my dad first told me about going back to work, I thought he was being funny. But he said my mom's salary was "cut in the economy" and it was a hard time. I didn't get it. My mom did her job so well. Dad said that it didn't matter how well she did her job—they weren't giving her what she deserved anymore. All he could do about it was try to make some money too, because things were expensive and only getting more expensive.

As I was thinking about this, I heard a sharp laugh. I could've sworn I could smell her *eau de toilette* fifty feet away. She said it was supposed to have a hint of cherry blossom and hinoki wood in it that must make me feel right at home. I felt anywhere but at home with her.

I turned my head toward the scent. *What a mistake.* Brooklyn, Ned, and Brooklyn's most recent recruit, Nika Hughes, were sauntering onto the lawn. In the dim light, they all seemed to have the same dirty blonde hair color and pale skin. I quickly turned back towards the iron gate. I hoped my dark hair would blend into the early night shadows. When they started making fun of Tick Tock Tommy for wearing two watches on his wrist, one with Boston time and one with LA time, because he missed his family so much, I knew they hadn't seen me.

"He kept trying to show me how his LA watch lit up in the dark by putting his hand underneath his desk. He's so weird," Brooklyn reported. I couldn't help but notice how different her voice was when she yelled at me to turn my alarm clock off every morning.

"Yeah, he's such a baby. I heard he calls his parents every day after lights out because he's scared of the dark. Is it true, Ned? His bunk is right under yours, right?" Nika probed, her voice significantly quieter and more nasally than the others, but raspy enough to be heard.

There was a shuffling in the grass from where I thought Ned was. "Uh," Ned hesitated. "I fall asleep pretty fast."

“You don’t have to be nice to him, because he’s your roommate,” Nika prodded.

“Yeah, some roommates are just losers,” Brooklyn added.

“You would know,” Nika threw in.

Then they all laughed. My stomach lurched like it never had. *They called me a loser.*

I could’ve thrown up when I heard my flip phone ring. The four of them snapped their heads towards me, I was sure. But I didn’t look. I darted down the edge of the property until I could circle my dorm in the shadow of the surrounding oak trees. The leaves had just started to fall, and they made loud crunching sounds as I fled. *Way to be graceful, Sam.* At least it was probably too dark for them to have seen who I was.

Once in my room I climbed up on my top bunk and fell onto my neatly tucked sheets. My phone started to ring again. That’s when it hit me. My ringer was the same as my morning alarm. *Brooklyn must’ve known it was me!* I screamed once, muffled, into my pillow. I didn’t pick up my phone. I let it slide into the corner of my bed, not caring if it fell past Brooklyn’s bunk and onto the floor, where it could break for all I cared.

But by the third ring I managed to care again.

“Hello,” I said softly, my voice two octaves higher than when I talked to anyone else.

My mom was always the first to respond, her voice steady, each word evenly spaced, ready to roll off her tongue like the rotations of car tires. “Hi, Sam. You’re on speaker phone. We’re on our way to team dinner right now, but the GPS says we have exactly twenty-three minutes to talk. Sorry we called a few minutes late. Our last meeting just ended. One of our

clients was surprised yet again to find out we were married. This one had the nerve to tell me I should've changed my name. Samantha, you never have to change your name."

I found myself nodding devoutly, as if my mom could see me through her Blackberry and know that I would always be Samantha Mercier-Lee, the daughter of Cynthia Mercier and Henry Lee. Even though the only name I felt described me in the moment was 'loser'.

"How was your day, Sam?" my mom asked, and I felt the truth expanding in my chest, ready to drip out the corners of my eyes, but then my mom added, "Have you finished your homework yet?" Oh. That's what she really wanted to hear.

"It's still loud hour. I don't have to finish my homework yet," I breathed out like air leaking from a tire.

My mom slammed the car horn. "Miscreants! Do those kids want to get run over?" she yelled. "What did you say, Sam? I couldn't hear you over these reckless skateboarders." I imagined my mom thoroughly annoyed, but still composed. Her back would be straight against the driver's seat, the black pin stripes of her blazer standing parallel right underneath her pointy chin. Her dark blonde curls would be the softest thing about her, but even those were always excessively managed.

"It's still loud hour," I was able to repeat clearly enough by holding my chest, which had started to feel funky—but I couldn't let my mom know I didn't feel OK. She'd blame it on my poor posture, then the water in the corner of my eyes would fall, and I never liked that.

"Sammy," my dad finally got a word in. He was clearly farther away from the phone, and his voice came out softer, blending in with the highway noises in the background. "How did you say you were doing? I was looking over some papers, and I think I might've missed it."

“Oh.” I could’ve told them then. *I hate this school. Everyone hates me. They just called me a loser. I want to go home.* But staring at the white speckled ceiling I felt nauseous. I couldn’t get the words out. “I’m fine.”

I think my dad sighed, but I couldn’t hear him. I pictured him unbuttoning and buttoning his shirt cuff, pondering if he should ask me how I was doing a second time. I swore to myself I’d tell him if he asked again. He’d fly right back home, get a new job down the street. I wouldn’t have to go to RISE anymore. I wouldn’t have to see random kids pull their eyes to the corner to look like “me” anymore.

But right when I was about to say all this, my dad turned Beijing opera on in the background. The shrill noises could’ve made the whole school shake through the phone. I planted my face in my pillow and screamed silently. *They’d rather listen to this screechy music than me!* I pushed even further into my pillow, the tears in my eyes soaking the cotton. Ignoring my parents’ confused voices, I punched my mattress so firmly that both bunks shook, and all the blood gushed into my hands and face.

After I got it together again, and I picked up the phone, my mom gave me advice. “Where did you go?” she questioned over the sharp music, but it wasn’t really a question. “You should always remember to tell the person on the other end of the phone to hold on a moment before you disappear from the conversation.”

You should always warn a person before you drown them out with some random opera music. I “apologized”, and it felt like coughing after water going down the wrong pipe. She couldn’t see, I told myself. But she couldn’t feel either.

“You have an incoming call, Cynthia. Looks like it’s from Steve Greller,” my dad mumbled. I didn’t like the way he said *Steve Greller*, but I didn’t know why.

“Alright, Samantha,” directed my mom. “We’ll practice phone conversations, next time, OK? We’ll call you at 7:00 PM Eastern tomorrow. Get your homework done, alright?”

“Alright,” I whispered.

“We love you, Sammy,” my dad interjected, hanging onto the last syllable, cradling the sentence.

I made myself say it back. They hung up first, and the music finally disappeared. But I kept my phone rigidly holding the curve of my cheek. Folding my knees to my chest, I realized I was still wearing my black flats. I flung them far away in disgust. My clammy bare feet shimmied under the sheets. My phone still hanging from my face, I shut my eyes and thought about my parents’ white comforter. About the fireplace right across from it. How above it hung a family photo. My parents were both looking at me, and I had my mom’s wide smile and my dad’s happy rainbow shaped eyes. When I was ten years old, I was all they ever wanted.

Then Brooklyn darted in with Ned, her arm hooked under his. “Get out,” she ordered. I knew better than to stay.

Chapter Two

I used to be the roommate Brooklyn wanted. When I first got to RISE, she loved yanking my hair into ponytails, just like her au pair did in France. She loved doing my makeup—because she had never done it on “eyes like mine”—while wearing her pink kimono-looking nightgown. One time, she almost stabbed me with mascara, but I didn’t care—that was when she ‘fessed up about her crush on Ned. I knew I had achieved inner circle then.

Everyone knew we were friends. We spent every loud hour together. When she crossed her arms, I crossed my arms. When she cursed in French, I grunted like I understood.

And she liked that my parents traveled for work. Hers did too. But one time in September her dad went from Paris to New York for his eye shadow company, and all he did was send her an email. She summed it up for me: “He was like, ‘I’ve seen you so recently, so it would be irresponsible of me to visit you—there are just so many important people who want to see me.’” I had nodded my head emphatically and said, “You think that’s bad? My parents *live here*, and they don’t want me under their roof. At least you’d live with yours if you were in Paris.”

But things started to turn when a few weeks later my dad came home in between travels and brought me mooncakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival. I put one on Brooklyn’s desk, saying, “At least one of our dads remembered us.”

She audibly gagged: “Is that *poop*?” Then she used my pre-algebra textbook to shove it on the floor. I never felt so shameful picking up a mooncake before.

My mom mailed a box of madeleines to me a few weeks after that. The note read: “Don’t keep them all to yourself, Samantha. Use them to make more friends!” So, I had what I thought was the best idea. To make up for the mooncake incident, I put a madeleine on Brooklyn’s desk, but she scoffed, “You want me to eat an American madeleine? *Dégoûtant!*” I ate the rest when

she wasn't in the room, but I told my mom Brooklyn ate most of them. Even though she wouldn't touch anything I touched after that. Even though she stopped talking to me after that.

I couldn't believe it didn't work! That's how I got to know my first best friend Delilah in sixth grade. I was having trouble making friends, and my dad was super invested. He was a stay-at-home dad at the time, and the best part was that I was his greatest and only ambition. So, going the extra mile times a thousand, my dad made hundreds of red velvet cupcakes for my school's bake sale. Delilah jumped up to our table to put in her donation and exclaim, "I always wanted to try a red velvet cupcake. How did you make them, Mr. Lee?" My dad chuckled agreeably and put his hand on my shoulder to proudly declare, "I couldn't have done it without my girl, Sammy. We bake every week. Would you like to join us sometime?"

We spent almost every day together after that, baking, going to the movies, and browsing at the mall, all with my dad driving us. She lived a lot farther away, and her parents couldn't pick her up before 6 PM. I understood. My mom was never home either. But my dad always was.

Every Tuesday Delilah came to my house for takeout. We ate wonton soup and Pad Thai and Hawaiian pizza. We rested our full tummies on the living room carpet, watching TV. Whenever I got up to change the channel, I would accidentally roll on her black curly hair, and she would laugh, because I would scream. She thought my screams were funny. She thought I was funny.

Like me, she was also mixed-race. We talked about what traits we got from each parent. She got her curls from her black dad, and her small ankles from her white mom. But her curls were looser than her dad's, and her ankles were darker than her mom's. I got what she meant, because my hair was wavy like my mom's, but deep brown and shiny, and my skin was soft like

my dad's, but I couldn't tan as well. We both wanted to dye our hair blonde someday, but our moms thought it was stupid.

We spent so much time together that she practically lived at my house on the weekends. During our last sleepover in June, we were making s'mores, and we stuck them in the oven for a second. Some marshmallow fell on the burner, and the smoke got in our eyes. I thought Delilah's eyes were watering because of that, but it turned into real tears. Her large brown eyes looked like melting truffles.

"I'm moving," she blurted out, her braces sticking out as she waited for me to react.

I stood awkwardly with oven mitts on my hands. My chapped lips fumbled a bit. "You're moving? Where?"

She pulled the strings on her sleeveless plaid hoodie. "Missouri."

"What's even in Missouri?"

"You mean what's even in *Misery*." She crossed her arms.

I tried to cross mine too, but the oven mitts did not feel particularly comfortable against my rib cage.

She sighed and stuck a marshmallow in her mouth. "You better miss me," she said through the white fluff. "I can't imagine life without you. Whose house will I practically live in?"

"Your own," I quipped, but I didn't feel as light as I sounded. The truth was, I couldn't imagine life without her either. I loved having her in my home. I loved all the food we ate and the TV we watched. I loved talking about all the people who never bothered to talk to us. I loved that we didn't have to care because we had each other. I loved her. And I assumed sixth grade was how all of middle school was going to go.

But I was wrong. After school ended, I never saw Delilah again. The worst part was she didn't have a phone—not even a house phone—so when she left, she left. Then my parents forced me to go to RISE. She couldn't find me anymore even if she tried. My dad went back to work at the same time, so I wasn't even sure what we'd do if she found me again anyway.

I thought Brooklyn could replace her, just a bit, and that I could even say I made a friend alone this time. But my plan was turning into a total disaster.

Chapter Three

Banished from my own room, I slunk into a corner of the dorm living room, sinking into an old-fashioned armchair as much as the unfriendly stiff back would let me.

I couldn't complain. This was as close to privacy as I was going to get.

I made myself as small in the chair as I could. The brownish charcoal colored leather was what I imagined the inside of a cave would look like if I went as far as I could in, until I couldn't see an outlet. The arm rests were so regally carved that my elbows felt crooked and awkward wrapped around them. I slouched so steeply that my head sunk below the arm rests and my legs stretched out sporadically. I didn't like them out—I was sure it looked like the chair had grown clumsy, unstable limbs—so I folded them in below the chair. I closed my eyes, trapping my thoughts inside myself.

In my closed-eye stupor, I could feel every part of my body more. The way my skirt was tucked up under me, leaving my legs a little bit colder, even under my grey cotton tights. Or the way my black flats pinched my feet and caused my pinky toenail to grind a crescent shape indent in the neighboring toe. Or how there was one particularly wavy strand of hair falling slowly across my face as if it were dusting off my perspiration. It was so ticklish I tried blowing it off, but it wouldn't move. Again, and again. I didn't have enough wind in me to get it off my—

All of a sudden, I swore my hair moved on its own. Just flipped off my face. *What?* I yanked my arm free from the chair and—

Bang! I whacked Tick Tock Tommy in the nose.

“Ew!” I shrieked, leaning so sharply away from him that I almost tipped over the heavy old chair. He felt so cold and lumpy. “What are you even—” I started to chastise him, but as

soon as the words came out of my mouth, Tommy looked so scared that his chest seemed hollow. He could've been a kitten whose owner just poured water on him. Even the tiny whiskers he was spottily growing on his face looked wetted down.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Tommy whispered, and I could've sworn I saw his eyes tear up a bit. He clenched one of the two watches on his wrists—the one with LA time—as if it would magically make his family appear and comfort him. His too spiky brown hair looked like it was wilting, just like the corners of his mouth. I didn't want him to cry. I patted his shoulder as if I were trying to put a small fire out and I didn't know how.

"Please don't cry," I mumbled, and I sounded just like my dad.

But he didn't cry. He almost looked too closely at my extended arm, as if he was trying to see my hand on his shoulder.

Before I could withdraw my arm, I heard a large, loud, and nasally "Gross!" from the stairs. Nika was gaping at us from the last step. She slapped her pink nail polished hand over her mouth and backed out, as if she were embarrassed to have seen us. I didn't know why she was embarrassed when I was the one caught sympathizing with *Tick Tock Tommy*. Brooklyn would surely know about it within a few seconds, and I could never come back from that one.

I recoiled like I had touched something dirty.

"Are you OK?" Tommy asked.

I grimaced.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I just... there was a hair on your face and I noticed you couldn't get it off..." Tommy shifted uncomfortably.

Other kids started shuffling in and out. It was the end of loud hour. I was at risk to be seen with Tick Tock Tommy again.

Then something happened that made me think everything would change. Ned appeared and came up to Tick Tock Tommy. He seemed to want to talk to him. They were never seen talking, even though everyone knew they were roommates. Seen together for one of the first times, Ned looked much sharper, while even Tommy's fingers were a little bit dull and thin, like the pieces of chalk that our teachers used.

Ned didn't stay for long. He didn't have to. Hands in his pockets, casual smile on his face, he said to Tick Tock Tommy, "I didn't know you had yellow fever."

Then he winked at me.

I noticed Brooklyn standing behind him, proudly smirking. It felt like his comment came as much from her as it did from him. Maybe even more so, because she started tugging on the sides of her eyes and laughing.

For the third time in one night, I fled. Only this time I did it slowly. I shuffled out with the other students who didn't live there. I avoided all eye contact with Ned, Brooklyn, and Tick Tock Tommy. I followed a particularly narrow cobblestone path, embedded by evergreens. The path was unfamiliar at night—I was entranced by it. No one else was going down it.

Looking around and around, the trees were so thick that they seemed almost impenetrable, but the glow of the city reached out from behind them. I could hear it calling my name, retrieving me from this shadowy enclave. I passed a particularly bright clearing in the trees that led to the main entrance of the campus. Next to the RISE Academy sign was a statue constructed of steel bars. At convocation, Headmaster Montgomery said it was supposed to

represent raising the bar of success. But standing in the way of the city, it gleamed so sharply that it seemed violent to me.

Anxious, I ran back to my dorm, and the building looked strangely comforting, but not quite inviting. The red bricks seemed to be burning from the electric candles in each window. Four white pillars surrounded the black door, imprisoning the building behind. I wasn't ready to go back in. What could a few minutes late hurt?

Looping around to the back, right near the old gate once again, I caught sight of how black and pointy the gate looked at night. The moon shown clearly, full but far away, like it was something to run after. A sight to see if I could just keep moving towards it. Eventually, I'd be so close that it would glow like day. There would be no way to look back and see my school. Everything else would retreat, losing itself in the past. It'd just be the moon and me.

The moon deserved a song. It looked so lonely up there. There were no stars anywhere, all drowned out by light pollution. Even the clouds seemed to get lost on their way to the moon—they were nowhere to be found. So, I hummed to the moon. "Eleanor Rigby" was still circling through my head. I liked it. I hoped the moon liked it too.

It was the closest thing I had to a friend.

Chapter Four

My alarm was a kid I wanted to punch. I banged it off. Groaning, I huddled back beneath my sheets. It couldn't have been 7 AM yet. I didn't hear Brooklyn clawing through her drawers.

As I fell back asleep, my dad's voice started rolled through my head. He said, "Hello? Hello? Hello?" as if he were trying to get my attention. On the fourth hello I realized it wasn't in my mind.

I snatched my phone. "Dad?" I whispered, squinting at the small screen. 6:02 AM.

"Hi, Sammy," he said, his voice cutting through. In my confusion, I felt like I could open my eyes and he'd be there, hovering over me. His voice was never so close over the phone. My mom's voice was always closer, sharper, than his.

"What's happening?" I mumbled.

My dad's voice rose while he spoke, like an airplane taking off. "I'm sorry to wake you, sleepyhead. We're in the airport about to fly home now, but we won't get into Logan until you're in class. We'll pick you up after school, alright? 3:30."

I nodded yes repeatedly, until I realized he couldn't see me.

Then my dad was speaking, but not to me. I heard what I thought must've been, "Did you take the meds, Cynthia?"

What meds?

He spoke so gently to my mom that I imagined him rubbing her back. "Henry! Don't move that... I was lying on it..." groaned someone who sounded awfully like my mom, but weaker than she'd ever be. "Sorry, honey... here you go, Cynth," my dad replied. But I couldn't

imagine my mom huddled in an airport, my dad speaking to her in such hushed tones that he could've been swaddling her. My mom didn't huddle.

My dad's breath hit the phone again.

"What's wrong?" I said too loudly. Brooklyn thrashed around in her bed.

"Mom's just not feeling well. I'll talk to you later, Sammy. Be ready by 3:30."

I anticipated how Brooklyn would react if I drove off after school with my parents. I could hear her sneer to Ned that I was just like the other day students, babies who go home after daycare.

"Did you hear me? I said be ready at 3:30," my dad repeated.

"But do I need to—"

"I've gotta go, Sammy. I love you. Bye."

He hung up. I didn't say bye. My mom didn't say hello. I groaned, and Brooklyn banged the wall. "Tais-toi, espèce d'idiot!" she hissed in French. I didn't want to get bit by this snake.

But there were much scarier snakes. Whatever was going on with my mom, for example. Even when she broke her leg and caught the flu in the same week once, she still went to work and looked almost normal except for the cast and crutches. No one guessed she was burning with a fever, and later she told me she used her pain to relate to a client with chronic back pain. She was always capitalizing on her situation.

Not much could get my mother to come home from a business trip at 6 AM on a Tuesday morning. I could hear her protesting that she had the whole week left—*a job to be done is a job to be done, Samantha*. I thought she'd call right back and explain that there was a measles

outbreak in Chicago or something. There just had to be another reason they were coming home early.

What if there was something wrong with my mom? *Cancer? Pregnancy?* Her voice did sound queasy in the background.

I never fell back asleep again. I tucked myself tightly inside my blanket to protect me from the unsafe air. Like the shadows would bite.

I used to feel this way when I was younger, and I'd scream for my dad to come help. When he came, he'd sit on my bed, sort through my messy hair, and whisper prayers into the night. "Lord, tell Sammy she's underneath Your wings. Inside your tent. Nothing will ever harm her."

I could not call for my dad anymore. If I called my dad back, he'd already be on the plane, flying away. So, instead, I repeated what my dad used to pray a hundred times over, but with my mom's name instead of mine.

My real alarm rang at 7 AM, and my heart jumped. The beat of the alarm pounded waves of anxiety through my body. My parents were probably up in the air right now, reading my mom's latest diagnosis for all I knew. Was it even safe for her to fly?

The chilly autumn gusts struck me harder than usual as I stepped outside to go to breakfast. When I entered the long brick dining hall, the bacon-filled air choked me up. The chandeliers were turned up extra bright, and the floral wallpaper invaded my line of vision. Each table was so circular that I felt a little bit dizzy.

I perched on the tip of a chair, my eyes darting to each person entering. I plucked a scone from the platter in the middle of the table. I picked at it, eating it crumb by crumb. Between bites, I watched how different people flocked to each table. Usually, the last few people to flutter in would join me, but no one ever came. I tried to make eye contact with a few familiar faces, but they didn't seem to see me.

But everyone else seemed to see me. I could've sworn some were staring. Peering at their phones, peering at me. Laughing. No, no, it couldn't have been about me. I was just going crazy. Nothing was ever about me here.

I poured myself water from a clear pitcher. Even as I looked at the pitcher, I could see my classmates through it, body language pointed towards me. I put down the pitcher and looked over my shoulder. Just a china cabinet, full of delicate heirlooms. They had one at my aunt and uncle's house in Quincy, but it was stacked with newspapers and pictures from their wedding. It was nowhere near as beautiful as the one behind me with its dainty pink flowered plates. They could've been from England. Maybe everyone was looking at it, not at me. Definitely not at me.

I drank my cup slowly, my back straight as a tree trunk. I noticed that the chandelier above me resembled a shining bird cage. Maybe they were looking at the chandelier. Didn't it look a bit different than the other ones? Like it was newly replaced. But they definitely weren't looking at me. I pulled up my phone. No texts from anyone. My parents were still on their flight over. *They can't text in the air, Sam.*

Tick Tock Tommy slid into the dining hall from the door farthest away from me. He tried sitting at multiple tables, but they all told him they were too full. They could've squished, I

thought, but I knew his reputation. I lowered my gaze. He couldn't get all the way over to me. Someone would take him. I kept drinking my water.

My stomach lurched when I heard Tick Tock Tommy say, like he had spent a few minutes talking himself up to it, "Can I sit with you, Sam?"

I didn't want to look up—as if he would believe I hadn't heard him—but I knew I had to. "Ah," I began, but nothing else came out of my mouth.

Maybe I was just imagining it, but Tommy looked like he thought I was his new best friend.

Averting my eyes, I had to pretend no one else was in the dining hall. "Just sit down," I said begrudgingly. I cringed as he pulled out his chair and it squealed noticeably. Multiple people looked over.

"How are you, Sam?" He sounded so go-lucky, as if his eyes weren't watering.

"I'm fine." I didn't return his question.

He answered anyway. "I'm fine too. I'm late to breakfast because I was calling my dad this morning. It's a three-hour time difference between here and LA, so we have to plan it out."

He kept talking, but it made me so anxious that I kept looking around. Brooklyn was half a dining hall away from me, and she was for sure watching our conversation, making fun of us with Ned and Nika and some other kids I didn't recognize, but who looked like they'd be her friends.

I didn't have to squint my eyes too hard to see that Brooklyn was typing viciously on her phone. An alarming number of phones vibrated and jingled and beeped, mostly concentrated

around one side of the room. But then more phones went off. This couldn't have been a coincidence. Neither my or Tommy's phone went off. I couldn't help but think this had something to do with me. I waited to get a text. I convinced myself that everyone was texting now because in a few minutes, when we'd all be in first period, they'd have to turn their phones off and leave them in their bags. Yeah, that was it. This was normal.

Tick Tock Tommy was still talking. It was like he was a clock, but instead of ticking every second, he said a word every second.

More phones were going off. *It didn't have to do with me. It didn't have to do with me.*

When breakfast ended, I practically ran over Tommy trying to leave the table. Thankfully, he didn't follow me. He must've had class in the other direction. I set out for the door closest to my first period class.

I saw a pink phone on a table next to the one Brooklyn had been sitting at. My curiosity piqued. If these successive texts were about me, I could find out right then. I casually grabbed the phone, as if it were mine, and kept walking. I had to find a private place to check this out. I told myself I'd leave it on a table after lunch. No one would ever know anyone had ever taken it.

I went in the direction of my class but, looking around to make sure no one was paying attention, I ducked behind a wall of evergreens. I sat at the bottom of one in a pile of windblown leaves, which were the same color as yellow hard hats, and greedily flipped open the phone.

Whoever this was, they had been texting Nika, Ned and 13 other people I barely knew. I was immediately interested. I saw a few LOL's, IKR's, and emojis I didn't understand. They started to talk about how gross something was. When I saw Tick Tock Tommy's name, I knew it

was coming. I knew it was all coming down. My heart beat faster. I stopped breathing. Bracing myself, I read:

SAM KISSED TICK TOCK TOMMY AND HE ALMOST CRIED.

I reread the texts a few times. I knew it. I knew it. I knew it. I knew it. They were all talking about me. Laughing at me. Staring at me. *They think I kissed Tick Tock Tommy.* My whole body felt sticky, clumsy, thrown away like a piece of old, over chewed gum that Nika stuck on the wall for everyone to see and try not to touch. The worst part was that I was stuck right next to an older, grimmer strip of wimpy vomit-colored gum—he was left there months ago, with the addition of his second watch and teary eyes. No one would ever want to pick me up again. I was inseparably and indefinitely mushed together with Tick Tock Tommy.

This isn't fair! I'm not as gross as he is!

I started to cry, rubbing my eyes so hard they made sloshy noises beneath my fingers. I felt like my classmates were surrounding me, catapulting flaming rocks into my hiding place. The rocks kept falling and falling, as if each of my classmates were in a line, one by one coming up to load the catapult. Everyone else clapping after each flaming rock brought down a different part of me. I could hear everything they were saying about me bursting in my body:

What a loser what a baby she's so gross he's got yellow fever we hate her we wouldn't be caught dead with her she's weird he's weird they're weird look at them crying together they're such babies they can't stand missing their mommies and daddies so they cling to each other at least they'll end up alone together because no one else would ever want to go near them

I had never felt such a blazing loneliness in my life. Not even the cold air could cool me down. The words burned hotter in my chest, hot like the blazing red trees a few feet away. Even

the orange leaves reminded me of fluorescent prison uniforms. There was no way I was going to go to class, with everyone spreading rumors about me. But if I went back to my room, I'd basically be waiting for Brooklyn to come back. My stomach lurched at the idea.

But I couldn't go home either. If my parents saw me, I'd only cause them more stress. I didn't want to tip my mom overboard.

But I couldn't have them come here. If anyone saw me getting in a car with them, they'd know I was just like Tick Tock Tommy after all, counting the minutes between my parents and me.

But more than anything, I couldn't stay there. I had to leave, and I had to leave right away. Soon enough, I was on the narrow path I had been on the night before. The thick trees made me feel safe for a minute, as if no one would see me. I saw the RISE academy sign in the clearing, across from the statue of steel bars. Was I really doing this?

I passed the steel bars in a blur, almost surprised they didn't stop me from leaving. There was no backtracking. I was out. If they caught me now, they'd know I'd left campus boundaries. I broke out in a run.

Chapter Five

I barreled by big houses with columns and bricks and trees. I could've sworn I was going so fast they got smaller and closer, but it wasn't because of my speed. I was leaving the outskirts of Cambridge. The houses became squished apartments with paneling and steep stairs, and the sidewalk got uneven—making me trip on a bump in the concrete. My heart pumped. I wasn't sure whether it was because I was running or because I almost fell. *And who knows who's looking from their houses!* So, I ran, and I ran, avoiding all eye contact with anyone who I knew had to be staring at me.

The shame felt endless.

By the time my legs started hurting, the steeple of St. Paul's Church rose on the skyline, halving the height of the houses in comparison. Central Square was near. People were near. I could slow down, disappear behind the shuffling bodies and the many storefronts. *No one here will think I kissed Tick Tock Tommy. They wouldn't even care. Phew.*

Chest heaving and face raw from the wind and tears, I gave myself a break beneath the shadow of St. Paul's. It was technically a red brick building, just like my dorm, but its redness was earthier and deeper. It looked warm, but not hot like an uncontrollable fire. Instead, it reminded me of a cozy campsite fire where I could roast s'mores. Just like I used to pretend to do in the kitchen with Delilah, but for real and for just me. That was all I wanted—to feel cozy, to throw the night and morning into the flames so they'd burn out of my memory. I could fall asleep next to the flickering embers, and I'd wake up with the smell of smoke entangled in my hair. The best part: Brooklyn wouldn't be there.

Sounded like a great idea! And it wouldn't be too crazy for a member of the Mercier-Lee family to take shelter in a church.

My dad once told me he was driving through the blizzard of '78—he had just barely gotten his license, and his used car was bought with rust eating at its edges—when so much snow piled up around him that he got stuck on the highway. He knew you could get asphyxiated if you stayed in an immobile car with the heat on and snow covering the exhaust pipe, so he left his old beige clunker abandoned along with a line of others. He stomped through feet and feet of snow until he got to a small town in the middle of Massachusetts. He found a white church with a steeple that almost blurred into the fuzzy atmosphere. The door was just beginning to be barricaded by the piles of heavy snow. My dad could barely walk, but he saw an open window with a candle glowing inside. He plodded through, climbed into the window, and spent the night on a couch in the church's nursery.

He slept in that church. I can for sure hide in this one.

I definitely couldn't climb in through the windows though, because they were mostly boarded up and too high off the ground. There were, however, a few gaps in the boards, so maybe if I had a ladder, I could get in that way.

As I rounded to the front of the church, a middle-aged black woman in a red shawl held open the front door. Even though her presence meant I couldn't get past her, the brown earthiness of her complexion looked like it was right where it should be next to the wine-colored entrance. Her hair was so short that the roundness of her face and facial features struck me softly. She drew circles around the block with her eyes, searching for something. When I fell into her orbit, she smiled gently.

“Good morning,” she called out to me.

I tipped my head, embarrassed I had been caught observing her—and, in a way, caught trying to break into the church. “Good morning!” I replied, unsure if I said it loud enough for her to hear me.

“What are you doing here all alone? Are you on your way to school?” the woman asked, concern in her slightly parted lips.

I glanced over my shoulder, paranoid that someone passing by would recognize my uniform and know that my classes had already started, and I wasn’t there.

“Yes,” I said, but my voice tilted up at the end like it was a question.

The woman raised an eyebrow. “Are you alrighty today, sweetie?” she asked. I felt like she was reaching out to me, but it wasn’t a harsh hand.

After a small delay, I nodded. It suddenly whipped through my mind that she might know someone at my school. *What if she calls them and gets me carted back to campus?* I couldn’t go back and face everyone who was painfully repulsed by me. If I was repulsive, I’d be repulsive by myself. I didn’t need them anymore. I definitely didn’t want them.

“Have a good day,” I abruptly excused myself from the conversation, turning away. The woman called out after me, “God bless your day!” but I let it hit the back of my head. I ran away so quickly I almost bumped into a cop. “Sorry, sir!” I cried over my shoulder. *I’m not trying to go to jail today.*

After I passed the Number 1 bus—*my* Number One bus—and merged onto a much busier sidewalk, building signs juttled out all around me. The buildings looked like they were wearing

visors, and I could crouch underneath their shade. *Why are they all closed! Where am I supposed to go?* Shivering, I had to find shelter.

I passed an antique shop that read: *out of business*. Restlessly laying in the indented entryway was a bearded old man grimacing and muttering like he was in pain. His eyes were shut, but only loosely; he was ready to move at anything that disturbed him.

My gut tightened and drove me to walk faster. My mom would've said, "Don't make eye contact with homeless men! It's not up to little girls like you to help them out. They have shelters for that. Even when they aren't men—even if they look young and harmless—they're probably miscreants. Don't talk to them!" I nodded, but I didn't know what "miscreants" meant.

A few suited-up professionals darted by me; I bet they lived in the big houses I walked by, or maybe they lived in skyscrapers. They reminded me of my parents' friends. They always had a place to go. I, on the other hand, did not have a place to go.

Oh, I need to text my parents! What if they try to pick me up from school! If Brooklyn saw them, she'd have even more to make fun of me for. She bashed on those baby day students, but you know who's even worse than that? Midday students! The ones who can't through a day of school without their parents! But my hands were too cold to text.

I neared a store called Gilbert's Great Gifts. They had a thousand different gadgets and toys in the window—they even had a shelf of books inside. My mom would approve. But wait! In big red letters a sign said it opened at 10 AM. I patted my skirt to grab my phone, but realized I had no pockets. Hm. Couldn't have been there. I peeled off my jacket. I must've put it in there.

"Aha!" I exclaimed to myself as I victoriously lifted out a phone.

But this phone was bright pink.

Oh, my gosh. I forgot to put the phone back on a dining room table! What had I done. I peered at it closer, wondering whose phone it could be, but there was no way I could return it without turning myself in. I was a runaway now. I couldn't be worried about taking random kids' phones.

I was a runaway now. No, no, I couldn't have been. I was running home, for Pete's sake. If anything, I'd be running away if I went back to school. School wasn't my home.

I dropped the stolen phone in my backpack, but not before checking the time. It was only 8:42 AM. Gilbert's wouldn't open for over an hour. I couldn't bear the cold for that long.

I huffed, and my breath spiraled out like smoke. I plopped down in exasperation by the gift shop door, hugging my bag to my chest. I didn't care if I looked like a lost school girl. I didn't care if I looked like the on edge homeless man down the street. I was tired, and I wanted to be at home in my bed. I had a Scooby-Doo comforter, one I'd never let Brooklyn see. I wanted to put on my dad's old mustard green shirt and my brown stretchy pants and pretend to be Shaggy. I wanted to have so much fun that I'd never need any friends.

It's even colder sitting down! How does the homeless man do it? I snapped up to go back the way I came, crossing the street to avoid walking by the homeless man again; it was what my mom would have wanted me to do. A few doors down I crossed the street again. It felt good to have traffic stop for me. It made me feel like I mattered more than wherever the drivers needed to go.

It also reminded me how fragile I was. They had to stop, because if they kept going, they'd kill me. Crush me like the translucent wings of a moth. But I didn't like thinking about that.

When I saw St. Paul's again, I knew I couldn't go back any further. It would be too risky. Too close to school.

It seemed like the church was my last bet. The sun hovered behind it, making it look even warmer than it had before. I imagined how quickly my hands would warm up if I walked inside. How quickly I could text my parents that I was coming home on my own.

My dad would approve. And no one from RISE would ever come looking for me at St. Paul's. Maybe the woman had left.

I tiptoed to the front, looking around to make sure no one would see me going in. When I got to the door, I saw a complicated legal document that read: "**Foreclosure**". I didn't know what it meant, but if the woman had come from inside it, I was sure it was safe to go in.

I pushed the heavy door with all the force I could. A breeze came from behind me that seemed to help me out. Before I knew it, the building enveloped me, and I was tucked away into the church's mahogany foyer. *This looks like the inside of a giant jewelry box!* It wasn't as warm as I thought it would be—it was almost as cold as outside and still windy. The lighting was dim—from an array of white candles and cracks in the boarded-up windows—but the light it had was cozy, like there could be a fireplace next to me. I rubbed my hands together. *I hope I can feel them again in this windy hiding place.*

The doors to the sanctuary were propped open, so I felt welcomed, and the aisle was clothed in red carpet. The benches and walls were mahogany like the foyer, and the beams across the ceiling reminded me of the bottom of a ship. Somewhere to hide in the midst of a storm.

A wooden cross hung behind the altar. It was modest but prominent, glowing above a candle. I looked from side to side. To the left there was a completely open window. The board had fallen onto the floor, and the wind poured in, making the table of short candles near it flicker. A breeze hit my face, and I turned to the right.

Uh oh, she's still here! On the edge of a pew, the woman with the red shawl sat beneath one of the only stained-glass windows left, right below a panel with the inscription: Mary Magdalene at the feet of Jesus. I heard about her when my dad took me to Sunday school a few years ago.

The woman with the red shawl bowed her head to pray. Suddenly scared of bothering her, I pattered backwards. But I accidentally banged into one of the pews. "Ouch!" I screamed, then slapped my hand over my mouth.

The woman's prayerful head jolted up.

I wasn't trying to disturb her. I didn't mean to!

But her soft face didn't look disturbed. "Hi, there," she said, and the church walls echoed her light tone, in case I needed more proof that she wasn't angry with me. "Back again so soon?"

She remembered me. I didn't know how to reply politely, so I nodded my head and otherwise stood as still as I could. I didn't want my body to make more noise. It was so hard in this wooden box!

I waited for her to fill the silence, but it took her a long time to come up with something to say. I would've run out if the cold outside wasn't so menacing. I was still rubbing my hands together to get the feeling back.

"It's sure windy out today," the woman commented, eyeing my hands. "It's supposed to be all week."

I nodded adamantly. *It's also sure windy in here.* To get the warmth back into my feet, I put one black flat over the other.

"What's your name, sweetie?" she asked. I didn't know if I was supposed to answer or not. I didn't know what my mom would think. Was this talking to strangers?

But this woman seemed anything but threatening. So, I answered, "My name is Samantha." I only introduced myself with my full first name when my parents brought home colleagues.

"Nice to meet you, Samantha. Call me Patricia."

Patricia stood up from where she was sitting. As she stood, she pulled a felt blanket off her lap and carried it over to me. She seemed too thin for her age. "Samantha," she started. "Why don't you sit down and put this blanket on you? You look freezing."

I didn't want to be rude. I tiptoed over to the pew in which she stood. As I approached her, I noticed that we were eye to eye. Her red shawl had a few holes where it sloped over her shoulder, and her blanket also seemed well-used. I sat down, and she draped it over me. My backpack was still on, so I protruded awkwardly from the bench. Trying to stick out as little as

possible, I squished my back against it. I wanted to look comfortable, because Patricia clearly wanted me to be comfortable.

“Thanks,” I mumbled into my jacket collar.

“Have you eaten breakfast?” she asked, anxiously.

I nodded again.

“Do you want some bread? I have some in the kitchen. It’s a little stale, but it’ll do.”

Don’t take food from strangers, Samantha. “No, I already ate. Thank you.”

Patricia sat next to me with a foot in between us. She placed her palms neatly on her knees. Her nails were long but scrubbed enough not to have any dirt underneath them, and her skin was beaten up. She averted her eyes and repeatedly read the front cover of a hymn book, keeping her mouth closed when she obviously had to cough.

I was going to say something, act a bit more normal. She made me feel at ease. But I was still worried I’d out myself as a runaway. Patricia didn’t need to know that I was supposed to be in class, even though my uniform probably gave it away.

My eyebrows shot up. I forgot to text my parents. Brooklyn could be laughing at me right now, seeing them try to pick me up! I fumbled through my backpack for my phone. I saw a glimpse of the stolen pink phone, and it sent a shudder through my spine. I couldn’t think too much about it. I flipped open my own phone, ready to text my parents. They probably already landed at Logan.

Five missed calls. Uh-oh. Sixteen unread messages. From my mom, my dad, and my first period teacher. I can’t believe I hadn’t seen this coming. The school had called my parents.

Panic flipped through my stomach like a pancake that was flipped too early—messy and probably a mistake. Fear splattered everywhere. I had probably exponentially increased my mom’s anxiety. *What had I done?*

If I called my parents and told them I ditched school midday, they’d send me back. If I didn’t, I’d only make my mom feel worse.

As Patricia saw me grow visibly distressed, she placed a hand on my back. “What’s wrong, sweetie?” Her round eyes were like soft, dark cushions.

I didn’t know how to answer her question, so I just angrily slapped the tears from my cheeks and groaned. I almost kicked the pew in front of me, but Patricia’s hand on my back was so soothing. She began whispering gently to me.

“It’ll be OK, sweetie.” Her voice sounded like a lullaby. “Everything will be OK.”

“No, no, everything is wrong,” I sobbed. “I didn’t want this—”

“No, you didn’t want this,” she calmly repeated my muffled words.

“I c-can’t go back there. I just can’t.”

“You don’t have to go back there.”

I wailed.

Patricia rubbed my back with greater firmness. She held my shoulders as I convulsed. Chest in, chest out. Gasp. Chest in, chest out. Gasp.

A few broken breaths later, and I didn’t have the energy to cry anymore. My lungs were worn for the day, and I could feel my right eyelid crease sticking to my eyelash line. I knew I

looked like a lopsided, swollen rat. I stuck my chin to my chest, so Patricia would only have to see as much of my face as she had to. I was so ashamed of what my classmates thought of me—I didn't want to be ashamed of what Patricia had to see too. I didn't even know her, and she shouldn't have to deal with my mess.

But her arm across my shoulders was so comforting. She smelled a little bit like cleaning products and a little bit like the wooden pews we were sitting on.

I could breathe again.

Out of my periphery, I saw Patricia tilt her head toward me. Slowly and intentionally, like she was reading off a therapist's script, she asked, "What's wrong, Samantha?"

One breath. "I shouldn't be here."

"Where should you be?"

"I don't know."

"That sounds very frustrating."

Oh, that's how I feel. I bobbed my head up and down. "It's so frustrating."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I paused. I shook my head no.

"You don't have to if you don't want to."

I sighed. "I don't know what I want."

"That's OK, too."

Her voice was so gentle that I believed her. But my phone kept lighting up beside me. “I’m not sure if anything’s OK.”

Patricia coughed over her shoulder. “It’s OK not to be OK too, sweetheart. I don’t know if I’m OK either.”

I felt her tenderness cut through me. *Why aren’t things OK for you?* My mouth formed the question, but it stayed trapped inside me. Trapped with thoughts of Brooklyn and Nika and Ned and what they would think of this. Trapped in seeing them laugh at my parents who wouldn’t let their daughter grow up. Laugh at my mom who never got laughed at. For the first time in my life, my mom wasn’t OK either. *Why is no one OK?*

But maybe, just maybe, I could make it a bit more OK for my mom. Maybe, maybe, maybe. If I just went home.

I looked up at Patricia, scared of how direct my gaze was. I lowered my head to make it less jarring. “I need to go... home,” I quietly resolved. My sweaty palms grabbed the ledge of the pew in front of me, the first step to standing up.

“Yes, sweetie, you should probably go home.” She affirmed me like I knew she would, but there was something more in the way she said it. Like she wanted to come with me. “May I pray for you first?”

Only my dad had ever prayed for me. But this felt right. So, I nodded. She squeezed one of my hands, and she closed her eyes. I copied her.

“Dear Father, I lift up Samantha to You. I pray that You will give her peace as she goes home and that You will give her courage to do the right thing,” Patricia prayed. I didn’t hear

what else she said, because I started to think about how I didn't have courage, about how I couldn't even be where I was supposed to be. But there was something in Patricia's voice that made me feel like I was supposed to be here. I wished I could take her home with me.

When she said "amen", I looked up to see a face as warm as a campsite fire. "I'll be praying for you, sweetie," she told me, as I walked so slowly that I seemed to crawl out of the church.

Chapter Six

Now that I was on the Number 1 Bus, I couldn't go back. I was going home whether I liked it or not. If my parents tried to send me back to school, I just wouldn't go. They needed to know I was OK. I needed to be there for my mom in person, like Patricia had been there for me.

I anxiously counted the stops down, scared that they'd miss one, and I'd miscount, and I'd get lost. Each minute I couldn't find my way, my mom would grow more and more distressed. My dad wouldn't know how to make it better.

My bag vibrated. I thought my phone was on silent. I peered inside, and I found that it was the pink phone making my bag shake. My stomach shook with it. I had to check what it said.

It was the same group text as before. Nika wrote:

SAM RAN AWAY WITH TICK TOCK TOMMY.

Uh-uh. My jaw dropped as low as my slippery, plastic seat.

But then another text came in from Ned that Tommy was in his math class. I'd never felt so grateful for Ned.

I watched each text come in about Tommy and me, what they thought of us, things they made up about us. How Tommy answered too many questions in class or how I always looked annoyed. Then Nika sent out a PSA about how Brooklyn had lost her new pink phone at breakfast.

I had Brooklyn's phone.

How didn't I know Brooklyn had gotten a new phone? How didn't I know that it was this one? It was so bright pink and obnoxious; how couldn't it have been hers. I felt like I was

holding an icky wad of gum in the shape of a cell phone. But I couldn't stop reading the texts. I could finally hear everything they thought about me.

I was so engrossed that I almost missed the Back Bay stop—that is, almost. I frantically tumbled off the bus. The last step was always a little bit too high off the ground for me.

Brownstones rubbed shoulders as they stood in line after line, announcing that I was almost home. Being next to them made me stand up straighter. In preparation for my parents, I flattened out my collar and adjusted my skirt, so the zipper was properly on the side of my hip. I zipped up my jacket, so my dad wouldn't have to chide me for not taking care to stay warm. I flattened down my stray hairs, but they rebelled and jutted right back out. I could feel the ridges in my stubborn waves. *I slept so badly yesterday!* I hoped my mom wouldn't notice. Brooklyn definitely would've noticed.

I turned left onto Leapit Road and started counting the house numbers: *sixty-one, seventy-three, eighty-seven*. Ninety-three was my favorite number, because it belonged to my very own brownstone; turquoise my first favorite color, because the door was that color. The beige stairs leading up to it were guarded by an iron railing. I could still see the lines I scratched into the most outer bar of the right railing—they formed “SML was here”. My initials were still clearly engraved, but the “was here” had started to fade. My mom wasn't happy that I had “defaced” their property, but she never did anything about it, so she couldn't have hated it too much.

I liked it. It meant I was finally home.

Being home made my heart so warm that I almost forgot what was waiting for me inside. The living room light was on, though the white curtain was drawn. I knew my parents were home.

I mounted the stairs, one by one to the top. I stood so close to the door that my nose almost touched it. I gulped. I didn't bring my key. I had to knock.

My mom had installed a gold knocker a few years ago. I used to bang on it for fun, but I never used it to get inside the house before. I never came in alone. I had barely ever used my key before.

Just like every colleague, friend, and stranger who visited us, I picked up the gold knocker and banged it against the door. As I moved it up and down, I saw that it had worn a mark beneath it, so that in its shadow the turquoise paint was significantly chipped.

I heard footsteps. I braced myself. I could see my mom's face, angry and busy. Maybe she'd be on the phone, trying to make up the time she'd lost on the plane. Maybe she wouldn't have time to be mad at me. She'd just usher me in and let me lie around all day while her and dad did business.

But it wasn't my mom who opened the door. It was my dad. He was wearing brand-less sweatpants and a t-shirt older than I was, and his eyebags could've dragged on the floor.

"Sammy!" he shouted and almost lifted me off the ground with a hug. I expected all the questions, but he didn't ask them. He just hugged me. "You're OK, Sammy, you're OK."

Maybe I was OK.

My dad basically carried me into the living room, but he did so quietly, as if the walls could've been upset if we walked too fast. He didn't remind me to take off my shoes.

My mom was huddled in the far corner of the sofa. No make-up, hair messier than my own, and a multi-colored fleece from the '80s. She sat beneath a blanket and a pile of tissues. A damp cloth was folded on top of her forehead. I had never seen her like this.

She stood up so uncarefully that the blanket and tissues fell on the perfectly white carpet. She limped over to me, her hand over her mouth. She hugged me along with my dad. But her hug wasn't harder than his. For a moment, I couldn't tell my parents' hugs apart.

“Are you OK, mom?” I was the first one to ask a question.

My mom nodded her head unconvincingly in my hair. Even her chin didn't seem to have quite the same edge.

“Cynth, you should sit back down,” my dad whispered. He directed her back to the sofa, and they started whispering how he'd call the school and he'd call this person and that. I didn't like the way he bent over to talk to her as she lay back down.

I was left standing by the door to the living room. My feet suddenly felt dirty, and I realized my shoes were still on. Groggily, I peeled them off and threw them back towards the door. No one told me not to throw things. My parents kept whispering.

I tried to listen, but all I heard were nonsensical snippets:

“...panicking right now.”

They think my school is panicking that I'm lost!

“...all of our money... can't afford...”

“But it's been months... We knew this was coming... We prepared!”

My mom has been sick for months?

“...what the truth is!”

“...should tell Sammy... It’s just the truth!”

“But she doesn’t...”

“Just tell me the tr—” I started to say, but my dad turned me around by my shoulders and practically drove me into the kitchen. He patted the stool at our granite island for me to sit on. When I was younger, he used to pick me up and put me on it himself.

“I have to call your school,” he stated. “They were very worried about you, Sammy.”
They were talking about me! They’re going to send me right back to school!

But instead he told the school that I was at home, and I wouldn’t be coming back again that day. I would be sleeping at home too. He’d bring me back in a few days. He hung up.

“I’m not going back to school, Dad?” I asked, stretching my neck out, as if there were an expression on his face I was missing.

He sighed. “Do you want to go back to school? I can call them back—”

I shook my head violently enough for him not to finish his sentence.

“We were very worried about you, Sammy,” he said, but he didn’t look at me. He had put down the landline and picked up his cell phone. He scrolled through his cell to find the right contact. By how much he scrolled he must’ve missed it a few times.

He unboxed his business voice so that each word expanded as he talked to his colleague. “Hi Steve. I’ll be at the office in a half hour to pack up,” he stated.

Were they moving offices?

“Yes, I know it’s unfortunate. Cynthia is doing fine. She won’t be with me though. I’ll take care of her office as well.”

I thought I heard my mom groaning from the living room. Like she was in pain.

“She has to pick up our daughter from school,” my dad continued.

But I’m right here.

“Sorry for the wait. We had an unexpected family crisis, but everything is handled now.”

Am I the family crisis?

“I’ll see you soon. Bye.”

As he hung up, he muttered mean things about Steve, things I never thought I’d hear my dad say. Things I shouldn’t have heard him say.

I tried not to think about it, my legs clanging against the metal stool. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going into the office,” he muttered absent-mindedly. His back was as stiff as cardboard.

I wanted to say something to figure out what was wrong with Mom. I wanted to explain why I ran away from school, and then tell him that there are better people in the world than Steve. That there are people like Patricia, and they’ll comfort you when you cry. And everything is going to be OK. We’ll be OK

But it didn't feel like I should be the one telling my dad all those things. Wasn't he supposed to be the parent? I waited for him to say the right things.

He never did.

My dad patted his pockets, like he was missing something. His arms looked like half-dead fish on a chopping board. "I need to change and go," he informed me. But then he slapped his hands on the granite counter. For the first time that day, he looked me in the eye. Bloodshot but pale, his gaze was jarring.

"Samantha," he called me with my full name. "I don't know why you left school this morning. I don't know why you thought it was a good idea. But I need you to take care of your mom right now. Watch after her. I'll take you back to school in a few days when we get this sorted out."

I blinked.

"Get some takeout for lunch. Use your emergency credit card." He grabbed a pile of menus from the drawer and slid them across the previously bare counter.

I blinked again.

Before I opened my eyes, he was gone.

My dad's footsteps and drawer pulls and door slams crowded the house. When he left out the front door, the gold knocker banged against the door. It sounded like company, but there was none. I sat melded to the metal stool.

Then I remembered my mom lying on the couch, crumbling, and that my dad told me to take care of her. *It doesn't matter that you don't know what's happening. Go help her.*

So, I wrenched myself from the stool and timidly approached the living room. “Hi, Mommy,” I greeted her, keeping my voice young and positive. But my mommy did not greet me back. She was fast asleep, her body folded over, so she looked like a crumpled tissue. My hands lay limp at my side, inadequate.

How am I supposed to take care of her?

A pill bottle with a moon on the label—probably meds to sleep better—was left open on the coffee table. *How can I take care of her if all she wants to do is sleep?*

I could hear my parents whispers repeating in my mind: “...what the truth is!” and “...Sammy... It’s just the truth!” But I still couldn’t figure out what they had been talking about. As I watched my mom fall into the crevices of the couch, not even clutching her blackberry, I asked myself: *what is the truth?* All I knew is whatever it was they weren’t telling me.

If my mom was sleeping, so would I. I didn’t have to deal with my own parents keeping things from me.

I decided to sleep under my parents’ white fluffy comforter. It would feel like a cloud. Then I’d dream of clouds. Everything would feel so light, so easy to carry, that I could sleep for ages. No one could throw anything on me. Every phone would be silenced. That’s what my mom was doing anyway.

But I stopped in my tracks at the door. There was a mountain of clothes on top of the bed. There were half-filled suitcases scattered on the floor. The desk was bare, save for a stuffed briefcase on top of it. The frames that used to show off our smiling family were piled up.

They did not need this much luggage to go to Chicago.

I ran to my own room.

Boxes mounted upon boxes invaded a whole side of my room.

Why is all my stuff packed up?

Ideas swarmed my head. *Are we moving? Are they lying to me? Why is my stuff in boxes but theirs in suitcases? Did they choose a house that had no space for me? Were they going to leave me at RISE forever, not even having me home for breaks? How can I even trust that my dad “went to the office”?* *Is my mom even sick? Or just exhausted from packing? Have they been scheming this whole time?* I realized I hadn't been home for so long anything could be true. If I didn't run home today, they could've completely moved to a new house without me, and I would've never gone home again.

Do my parents even want me anymore? They're sure not acting like they do.

Even my Scooby Doo comforter was sticking out of a poorly sealed box. I fell face first to the floor, the only thing that was still the same. I clung to my wobbly stomach. My hair, caught and pushed up by my shoulders, drooped over my cheeks. I wound a few ends of strands on my right index finger.

Brooklyn didn't want to live with me. And my parents might not have wanted me around either. They only needed me if I could help my mom feel better, but I couldn't even do that.

I felt like a homeless person wandering the hallway of my own home.

Chapter Seven

When I got back on the Number One bus, the driver was different, and I was going the opposite way. The thickly settled brownstones were receding, dissolving into Central. The sun was high in the sky, and my backpack was much plumper. I had dumped my notebooks and pencils underneath my bed, replacing them with a few changes of clothes, a blanket, a small pillow, and a toothbrush. If I was going to do something my mom was going to hate, at least I could do it with clean teeth. Maybe she'd have one less thing to worry about.

I hoped my dad could read my scribbled handwriting. On one of the take-out menus, I wrote that I was going back to school. That he didn't have to worry about me. That I left Mom sleeping soundly. That I was sorry I couldn't take care of her like he wanted me to.

It was partly true.

The tower of St. Paul's looked like a tent peg poking into the heavens. It was strangely slim, but it was such a welcome sight. I scrambled out of the bus when we got to the stop and let myself swim in the cool air. I glanced at the church, then turned to the more populated streets. My phone told me it was just past 11 AM. All the restaurants that had been closed were opening for lunch.

I had changed out of my uniform at home and had put on one of my mom's old button ups and a pair of plain blue jeans. Hopefully, I looked old enough for no one to question me. I went into a casual-looking sit-down restaurant. I smiled at the hostess and asked for a menu, confidently, just how my mom taught me. When I got it, I faded into the side of the restaurant, studying the options hard, just how my dad taught me.

They called their ham sandwich a *croque monsieur*, so out of disgust for Brooklyn, I couldn't get it. I ordered a BLT and a salmon sandwich, swiped the credit card my parents gave me for emergencies, and signed my mom's name. As I waited for my order, I opened my phone and deleted all the frantic messages from this morning. Switching to Brooklyn's phone, I grimaced before I even checked her texts.

The rumors that I wasn't ever coming back were rampant. I guessed they had to tell Brooklyn, so she wouldn't be too confused when her roommate wasn't there at night. It fit her to exaggerate, say I was never coming back. The rumors had to be from her, anyway, because they came from Nika's phone. Brooklyn was probably all over Nika's phone, since I had hers.

One rumor said I was pregnant with Tick Tock Tommy's baby. Ugh.

I rolled my eyes as if it didn't matter to me, but I kept reading. My parents were going to send me to China for nine months until I had the baby. Then my grandmother would take care of it, just like all the Chinese grandmothers seen rolling around with babies that obviously belonged to their underage grandchildren.

My grandmother didn't live in China. She lived in San Diego.

Someone else said I probably caught measles. But Brooklyn didn't let that one spread. She was my roommate after all. If it was contagious, she'd probably have it too. Lucky for her, pregnancy wasn't contagious. She said it always happens to the ones who seem the most like prudes.

Ouch.

Ned mentioned that he couldn't see Tick Tock Tommy knocking anyone up. I thought Brooklyn would brush him off, but texts came from Nika's cell affirming Ned for being so smart. Tommy was way too innocent. But then the texts read that I probably tricked him with some Chinese black magic. Nika's texts said she had seen it in a movie in France. That was when I was sure this had to be Brooklyn on Nika's phone.

That was also when I wanted to peel my clothes off my body and wash them a thousand times. For a minute, I even believed Brooklyn's texts. I was disgusting.

No, no, no, it's Brooklyn who's disgusting. Get yourself together.

But no matter how put together I looked in my mom's hand-me-downs, I didn't feel like it. My sandwiches came, and I tucked them underneath my armpit as I dropped Brooklyn's phone into my bag again. Every time I took her phone out, I felt sicker.

At least I'm right about staying away from school. I wouldn't want to still be in that shark tank. I'm never going back now. I just can't.

I scampered down the busy street, so the sandwiches wouldn't get cold. I ordered them warm for a reason: I had to make this the best offering I could manage. *I hope she's still there.*

When I shoved St. Paul's heavy doors open again, I almost expected Patricia to be waiting for me in the foyer. She wasn't there. I entered the sanctuary, but still couldn't see her. I remembered that she mentioned there was bread in the kitchen. Maybe she went to have lunch.

I hope she didn't leave. I hope she didn't leave.

I couldn't put my finger on the reason I thought she had to still be there in the first place. As I searched for the kitchen, my hope tumbled along with my frantic body. I caught myself

mumbling prayers that I'd find her. She was only person I had to go to; I didn't have a back-up plan.

There were wobbly stairs off the side of the foyer. I took them to the basement, which was flooded with surging yellow linoleum—it totally took up my eye space. At least it was badly chipped in places to break up the color. It had to connect to a kitchen. It just had to. My heart beat fast, but I didn't know whether it was from anxiety or mild running.

There were many rooms, but only one had an open door. I suddenly grew self-conscious that there might be other people there, so I slowed down until I was tiptoeing. I stopped to listen for voices but only heard a chopping sound. *Time to take a look.*

Patricia was leaning against a laminate countertop, struggling to cut up a loaf of bread.

Thank You, God.

“Hi, Patricia!” I chirped, smiling sheepishly. *Oops, I startled her.*

“My dear!” She laid her hand on her chest. “What are you doing back here?”

Laughter spurted out from a place inside of me that I didn't understand. “Um, I was just walking around the block and—” This was not what I came here for. “I need something from you,” I blurted out.

“How can I help you, sweetie?”

My eyes were wide. I was going to say it. “I need you to take me in.”

Patricia broke out in a coughing spurt. “Take you in?” she said as she recovered.

“I know, I know, it’s big, but the kids at school are so mean to me, and my parents are moving, and they didn’t tell me, and I think my mom’s sick, and they’re moving out of their offices, and they’re not lying to me, but they’re not telling me the truth either, and I can’t stand it anymore—I can’t take care of my mom when I don’t know what’s wrong, and they just won’t tell me what’s wrong, and I have nowhere else to go. Please, please, please take me in with you. Just for a few days. I don’t care if you have a bed for me. I’ll sleep anywhere. *Anywhere.*”

I could’ve fell to the floor, it took so much breath out of me. But I didn’t want to seem dramatic. “I brought you lunch,” I added.

The sandwich bag dangled in the air. Patricia looked at it, and there was something in her eyes. Surprise? Gratitude? Victory? Or all three. Then she looked at me as if she were making sure I was real.

“Where do your parents think you are?” she asked.

“At school. But my dad told my school I wouldn’t be back for a few days. And I left my dad a note saying I was going back. It’s perfect. My parents won’t worry, and neither will my school. Just don’t make me go back. I don’t want to be at home—it might not even be my home soon—and I can’t go back to school.” My argument sounded perfect to me. She had to say yes.

Patricia paused. Then she looked up, as if she were looking towards God. She looked back at me. “Samantha, I don’t live anywhere right now.”

I didn’t expect this answer. I tipped my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

Patricia sighed. “I was living with family, but... It’s a bit of a complicated story, dear. I’ve been staying here since.”

“Here? In this church?”

She nodded slowly, clearing her throat.

“Wow.” I couldn’t believe my ears.

Patricia looked back at the sandwich bag, which was now hanging closer to my side. “I wouldn’t normally say this.”

My ears perked up.

“But this is not a normal situation. Oh, Lord, it is not normal.”

I shook my head in agreement. I didn’t know what else to do.

“You see, Samantha, this church was about to be knocked down. But I grew up going here. When I recently came back here for shelter, the police thought—well, that I was an upset parishioner, staying in here to keep this building up.”

I raised my eyebrows. “And?”

Patricia smiled lightly. “I went with it. I became an upset parishioner, and it’s provided me shelter all the time since. But what it hasn’t provided me is food. When you came this morning, I was praying to eat today. You seemed to have answered my prayers.”

“Wow.”

“I think... this may be God telling me to let you stay.”

I could’ve started crying happy tears. “I can stay here with you?”

“Yes, you can stay here with me,” Patricia affirmed. Each word came out so carefully that I knew she genuinely meant what she was saying.

I jumped on her with a hug. For the next few days, I was safe.

“Let’s eat,” I said, pulling out the sandwiches. “I have one salmon and one BLT.

“Salmon’s my favorite,” she said.

“Thank God. I love BLTs.”

Chapter Eight

Patricia filled two cups with water from the kitchen sink, and we sat down at a round wooden table. We ate our sandwiches together. Patricia looked exceedingly content, and I remained relieved. I was here. I didn't have to go anywhere else.

I hadn't realized how hungry I was until I felt how much space there was in my stomach for my BLT. The scone I'd eaten that morning wasn't enough, and even that seemed so long ago.

Patricia had a pensive glow around her. I imagined her as having a thousand thoughts for each bite she took, and they must've been good thoughts because she grinned into her sandwich. She must've had too many to put into words, or maybe she didn't want to express them yet. She didn't talk while we were eating, only stopping now and then to cough.

I wasn't going to interrupt her thinking time. When I interrupted my mom's thinking time, she wasn't happy, and I wanted Patricia to be happy.

So, I tried to get lost in my own thoughts, but I could see the texts from Brooklyn and Ned flashing in my head. I held my stomach while I ate. It wasn't because I felt full—I was wondering what it felt like to be pregnant. I was wondering if I looked pregnant. I pinched my stomach. It was fuller than it had been the last time I pinched it. Maybe Brooklyn didn't pull this rumor out of thin air. Maybe she noticed I was starting to look the part.

The thought made me queasy. I dropped the second half of my sandwich onto the table like it was toxic waste.

I wanted to think of anything but my food, so I turned my attention back to Patricia. "Where does your family live?" I asked her.

My question poked Patricia from the soft fog she was in. “What did you say?”

“Oh, sorry to bother you. I was wondering where your family is.” I smiled politely, but when I saw her lips purse, I worried that I had not been polite. “You don’t have to tell me. Sorry I asked.”

“No, sweetie, don’t take back your question.” She coughed into her shawl, holding on tighter to the end of her sandwich. “They live around here.”

“Where around here?”

“Near here. In Framingham.” The syllables of Fra-ming-ham rapidly rolled over each other.

“Why aren’t you with them?”

Patricia paused. She took another bite of her salmon sandwich. She swallowed. “We have complicated relations.”

“What makes it complicated?”

“You’re a curious little girl, aren’t you?”

“Does it bother you that I’m curious?” Mom always told me to ask if I was annoying someone, because if I was worried about it, I probably was. She might’ve been annoyed in that moment though.

The right side of Patricia’s mouth raised. “I’m not annoyed at you, sweetie.”

“You weren’t answering my questions.”

“I’m not sure I have answers yet.”

I didn't have a follow-up question to that.

Patricia finished her lunch in silence. She stood and cleared the trash on the table and took our cups to the sink. She asked if I was done with my sandwich, then she wrapped it and stored it in an empty fridge that didn't have the hum or glow I expected. She opened the cabinet underneath the sink and lifted a bottle of antibacterial spray. She spritzed the table I was still sitting at, grabbed a napkin from a drawer, and wiped the table down. When she got to the part I was leaning on, she gestured for me to move aside, then she finished wiping the table. She put away the cleaning supplies and threw away the napkin.

I didn't think we made much of a mess, but she sure cleaned up as if we made a big one. I was going to ask her about it, anything to get away from my own thoughts, but Patricia opened her mouth.

She kept her mouth open for a moment, then she said, "Would you help me dust upstairs?"

"Upstairs?"

"The pews get rather dusty since no one uses them."

"Of course," I agreed, but I honestly did not see the point. Who was she dusting for?

Patricia grabbed two rags. She passed one to me and led me upstairs. She took the pews on the right, and I took the ones on the left. There were so many, and I didn't find them very dusty, but she was providing me shelter. Who was I to argue?

Instead, I asked another question. "Were the cleaning supplies here when you got here?"

Patricia kept dusting while she answered me. “No, I brought them. Be gentle with the wood. It’s old. You don’t want to chip it.”

“Oh, OK,” I agreed, feeling like I probably already chipped it, even with just a cloth. “How did you know what cleaning supplies to bring then?”

“I didn’t, at the time.”

“How long ago did you get here?”

“Around three months ago.”

“How have you gotten food?”

“I’d make sure to leave some candles lit, make it look like there was human activity. I’d sneak out. But one time an officer was checking on the church just as I returned. I snuck in past him. But it was too close, and I knew I couldn’t risk it again. The bread was my last food from that run.”

“So, you leave candles burning at night, even while you’re sleeping?” I searched the room for candles, finding them sporadically placed on tables near the windows. My eyes settled on a table particularly full of little candles, right next to the open window for anyone peeping to see. The small flames were dancing cheerfully in the wind, dipping with each breeze.

“Yes, I have to. But not as many, to be careful and to spare the candles. This church has stocked up a lot over the years, but every supply has its end, and I don’t plan on leaving any time soon.”

“How do you sleep with them glowing? I can’t even sleep with a nightlight.”

“I sleep on a couch in the basement where it’s warmer. There’s one in the nursery.”

Just like my dad. I almost told her my dad's story, but she was already nearly done with half her dusting, only stopping to cough. I had barely started. I kicked off my shoes, felt the red carpet underneath my feet. I went faster. Sloppier. It's not like she'd be able to tell. I glanced over at her. She was consumed by her cleaning.

By the time I caught up with her, we both reached the last pew. Patricia glanced over her shoulder and grinned at me, "Good work, Samantha." This was inaccurate. I did not do good work. I almost confessed this to her, but she brought out a red can of air freshener and sprayed it around, making crosses with the invisible fumes. Scents reminded me of Brooklyn, and that made me want to choke. I coughed as the product dulled the air around me.

"Oh, no, sweet pea!" Patricia exclaimed. "Is the smell bothering you?"

Between the coughing and my holding my neck like it was the end of me, she probably got the hint. I went to stick my head out the broken window, thankful when a breeze came in to clear the air and make me shiver.

"Why don't you take a break?" she suggested, and I agreed.

As I scampered out of the sanctuary, she was still spraying the can.

Free from Patricia's sight and able to breathe again, I meandered into the nursery. All I knew about her was that her family had some tension, she didn't have a real place to stay, and she loved to clean. Even I could relate to the first two. I had to find out more.

The nursery had blue elephants and pink striped wall paper, a plastic doll house, and a play pen that looked like it once surrounded a kid-sized stable. Instead, inside the pen was a

rolled-up sleeping bag and a large purse with white daffodils on it. Patricia sure came prepared. I guess I had, too.

Nothing else seemed to be Patricia's in the room, so I figured poking around in the purse would be my best bet. I wondered if I should feel bad for touching all her stuff, but I had to know who I was living with.

The first thing in her bag was a worn leather Bible. As I plucked it out, a photo floated to the ground. I looked at it greedily.

I didn't get it. There was a boy with what looked like a life jacket and an inhaler. Patricia was looming behind him, but not touching him. There was a man to the side, just in the picture frame. Patricia and the boy had masks and gloves on. The man did not. It should have looked like parents and a child, but it was something in the way they were posed that made me doubt it. Maybe Patricia was the boy's nurse or doctor. Maybe the man was just... a passerby? But they were in a living room.

More confused than before, I tucked the photo back into the Bible and kept searching. I sifted through dozens of wet wipes before catching a glimpse of plastic. The inhaler from the picture! *Why does she have this? The boy isn't here.* Beneath it was a crumpled pamphlet, which I flattened to read, "Affordable Housing in Cambridge". Figuring it was useful information, I was about to read up on it when I heard a door slam. I reorganized everything as accurately as possible and tiptoed out of the room.

Chapter Nine

I had never had to worry so much about food. I still had half a sandwich left, but Patricia didn't, and dinnertime was fast approaching. How was she going to get something to eat? I had to provide for her. It was weird to think that because I always had my parents' credit card for emergencies, I had more money than an adult woman.

I set out after the sun set, so if people were walking on the street who knew me, there would be more shadows to hide under. I put on a hooded jacket. I didn't like it, because it was the kind of pink that was on Disney princess backpacks. But it was all I could find when I was packing.

There were many leering men out. Talking to each other. Pointing at people exiting the T. Joking in their thick Boston accents. I saw two blonde kids who looked like Brooklyn and Ned. I jumped. But I realized they were strangers—siblings followed by their parents.

Calming myself, I ducked into a grocery store. Thankfully, my parents didn't do their own grocery shopping. They mostly ordered take out. I didn't have to worry about them finding me where they never went. But because of that, I really didn't know how to grocery shop. Patricia gave me a list; she said it was in order of how I'd find it. Too bad the first item was apples, and they were five different types. How was I supposed to know which she wanted?

As I examined each, I felt someone next to me. I didn't look up for fear that I'd know her. That she'd be one of my teachers, and my plans would be foiled. All I could tell was that it was a woman in a beige sweater with visible veins beneath her translucent skin. I pulled my hood tighter.

“The red delicious look absolutely disgusting today,” she said, too angrily for her complaint. “They belong in the trash.”

I gulped and kept my head down.

“I’ll have to go with the gala apples this time. I do *not* enjoy them as much. I’ll have to take this up with the management. If they don’t act on it, I’ll have to reconsider where I shop.”

I made sure to look away from the gala apples.

“Did your mom raise you with any manners? You’re supposed to answer when adults speak to you.” She sounded offended at me for not reacting to her annoyances. When I still didn’t answer, frantically trying to match the apples on the list with the ones in front of me, she added, “Does anyone speak English in this country anymore?”

Since when was I not responding to her rants because I couldn’t speak English? I should’ve said something. Thrown out some American teen trash, so she’d know what was up. What if she thinks I’m an international student? But, instead, I shrunk away from her and the apples, not giving her a second glance. Feeling a little bit bad for how much energy was buzzing in my body, all directed at not wanting to seem international. I heard her calling after me, asking me where my mother was. I didn’t like that question. Time to hide myself in the foot traffic.

By the time I left the store, I only bought half the items I was supposed to. Anxiously swerving around people who could have known me—paired with trying to avoid that beige-sweater lady—was not the most efficient way to shop.

When I walked back into the church, it was like a soft light set all around me, and I could look around freely again. Patricia was washing her hands in the kitchen, a line of candles, both

short and tall, providing light. I timidly set the groceries on the counter next to her and mumbled my apologies.

“Why are you sorry, dear? I should be thanking you.” She took the bag off the counter and wiped the counter with a disinfectant wipe. She washed her hands again.

Crinkling my forehead, I couldn’t stop myself from saying, “Sorry for putting the bag there.”

Patricia laughed. She hadn’t made eye contact with me yet. She was too busy looking inside of herself.

I pulled Brooklyn’s phone from my pocket and scrolled through the latest gossip. They were still making pregnancy jokes, but they also brought up something about Tick Tock Tommy yelling at Ned. Tommy didn’t yell. This wasn’t normal. My stomach growled again.

“Did you wash your hands from the grocery store?” Patricia’s question punctured my worry.

“No...” I returned my phone to my pocket. Soon it would be loud hour. *What if my parents want to call me? I never want to answer a phone call from them again. They’re probably moving out tomorrow for all I know. What if I left the state?* I sighed audibly, leaning my hip against the sink.

Then it hit me. “Why does the church have running water?” I implored Patricia with my most detective-like demeanor.

Patricia almost dropped the box of cereal in her hands. “Why wouldn’t it?”

“I would’ve thought they’d have turned it off by now, since you’re probably not paying the bill. You aren’t, correct?”

“Uh, no, I am not. We’re quite blessed here.”

“But you don’t have electricity. It’s almost as cold in the sanctuary as it is outside.”

“I suppose,” she said, holding down a cough. She went back to preparing dinner, closing the conversation with her body language. She thoroughly washed and chopped the tomatoes. When she finished, she immediately went to wash the knife. This didn’t seem efficient. I took it from her to wash it myself.

“I can wash while you make dinner,” I offered, but I had already started doing it. She didn’t have a choice.

“Do you help out a lot at home?” Patricia asked.

“Hm. No. Well, I don’t live at home. But when I do, my parents won’t let me help. They don’t even do it themselves. They’re very busy, you know. We’re not all home together too much anyway.” *We might never be again.*

“Do you miss home when you’re away?”

Well, that got my thoughts spiraling. *Why did I even run away? Didn’t I miss home all the time? No, only babies miss home. I’m not a baby.* But no matter how many thoughts I had, I couldn’t tell these to Patricia. What if she were to send me back to my parents? So, I shrugged my shoulders and said, “Kinda.”

Then it got silent, but I wasn’t up for that. I couldn’t stop thinking about if my mom was OK or not. *I can’t believe I left her knocked out on a sleepy drug.* I had to change the topic from

my family matters. However, I wasn't too creative. "Do you have parents?" I asked, then chided myself. What a dumb question. Everyone has parents.

"They're both passed."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to—"

"It's alright. It's been some time."

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Patricia stack tomatoes and roast beef on whole grain bread. Her eyes filled with gratitude, and she layered the meat so gingerly that it could've been coated in gold. Between her thinness and her excitement, she could've been starving and stranded on an island. My eyes went to her hands. Even in the candle lighting, they looked almost scaly, most likely beaten up by tons of cleaning products. I didn't like it when my hands got all cracked. It hurt. It must've hurt Patricia too.

She turned to me, and I quickly looked away from her hands. "How did you get the money for this? And the salmon sandwich?" She looked bewildered.

Why is it surprising? "I use my parents' money. They gave me a credit card, so I can buy food whenever I need it."

"That's very kind of them."

About the only kind thing they've done lately.

"Do you want tomato on your sandwich?" Patricia motioned to the extra slices.

I felt my stomach press against the metal button on my jeans. I could see the imprint it was making on my skin in my mind's eye. I gulped, thinking of the stale taste in my mouth from

not having eaten for hours, thinking of all the pregnancy rumors that should only belong to celebrities. “I’m still full from lunch.”

“Oh, that’s right, I put your extra sandwich half in the fridge. Why don’t you eat it? It’ll spoil if you leave it in there for long. The fridge isn’t running, you know.”

I shrugged. “Maybe later.”

Patricia furrowed her eyebrows in concern. I shifted my eyes to the yellow linoleum floor. Tried to look pleasant and not hungry. I thought Patricia was going to tell me to eat dinner anyway, like my mom would have done, but she stopped looking at me by the time I looked back up at her.

She went to get one of the lined-up candles from the counter—the tallest one there was—and sat down at the table with her sandwich. She motioned for me to join. Before she took a bite, she bowed her head to say grace, lips rolling in silent devotion. She pulled her red shawl tighter as she said ‘amen’. With her first bite she looked like she had tasted heaven.

“You must really love this church, huh?” I mentioned, feeling the phones in my pockets, one per side. Brooklyn’s phone felt sharper, the edges like cliffs that she could push me over.

The candle made a light circle around Patricia’s face. She looked like a saint we would have studied in history, if I were still going to school. “This place is quite important to me,” she said. Each word carried a carefulness I didn’t fully understand.

“You’re literally keeping it alive.”

“It’s keeping me alive.”

I didn't know what she meant by that. Then she broke out in a coughing fit, and I began to doubt that the church was in fact keeping her alive, but who was I to say.

When she stopped, I continued. "So, you got here three months ago. Is that when you left your family?" My feet swung underneath the table.

Patricia sighed, a flicker of something shooting through her eyes—or maybe it was the candle light. "A bit longer. Six months ago."

"*Six months?*" I repeated. I stopped gripping the phones in my pockets. I needed my hands to emphasize my disbelief, so I threw them in the air. "I haven't even been at my school for six months."

Patricia laughed, but it had a dryness to it. "Six months isn't as long when you're my age. But these were some long six months."

"How old are you?"

"That's not very polite."

"So, what did you do for the first three months?"

She took another bite, chewing so slowly it must've been on purpose. She gulped as she swallowed. I wondered if her throat was scratchy from the coughing. "I did a few things. I stayed at a hotel for a while... Then, I couldn't anymore."

"Then what?"

"I stayed at a women's shelter for a while. But it was so..."

"*So* what?"

“I had to use everything everyone else... touched. It was... disgusting.”

Images of Brooklyn’s clothes strewn everywhere flopped around like dead fish in the back of my mind. I nodded emphatically. “I know exactly what you mean.”

This seemed to let something down in Patricia. Her voice got louder, like I wound her up. “I, I just couldn’t take it! I had to leave. But I didn’t have anywhere to go. I would spend nights standing up—just *standing* and holding everything I had with me. I didn’t want to let anything touch the ground. Just mumbling, praying to myself. I stayed as far away from people as I could, but when they saw me... They must’ve thought I was a lunatic!”

She began laughing, and I didn’t know what to do, so I laughed with her. She wasn’t hysterical, but compared to how demure she had been before, I didn’t expect this. When she calmed down, she took a quick bite of her sandwich, and with a glazed over look in her eyes, she said, “Thank God I remembered this place. It saved my life. Even if it’s a cranky old building.”

“How did you go from staying in a hotel to homeless?”

Patricia’s face fell once again. “My credit card stopped working. I should’ve taken out cash while I had the chance.”

“How could it just have stopped working?”

“I don’t know. I think my husband cut it off.”

“You have a husband? Why would he cut it off?”

She pursed her lips. “I don’t know why he does what he does.”

“You don’t have your own money?”

“I don’t even have my own bank account, let alone a job. Can’t do either without an address.”

“What about your old address?”

Patricia’s voice grew quieter, as if it was muffled by something deep inside her. “Last I heard he moved.”

Is this the same thing that was happening to me? I drew in a deep breath, the candle fumes making me cough. Patricia flinched, coughing too. I croaked, “What happened with your husband?”

Silence. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“Oh, sorry.” I paused. “Did you have any children?”

She didn’t take this well. I saw water in her eyes.

“You don’t have to answer that if it makes you sad.”

“I can’t be afraid of being sad anymore. I love him too much.” Patricia held her shawl close to her cheeks. It made her face look like an upside-down teardrop. “I have a son. He’s in Heaven now.”

I tried to nod, but I felt like it would send an imaginary wind, and Patricia would crumble. I sat still. This moment didn’t need movement.

If Patricia moved anywhere, she moved inside herself. Her eyes like globes—the distance between us—shimmering in a removed sadness. I couldn’t reach her, but I was simultaneously absorbed in her mist.

She exhaled, and the candle in between us flickered. “He passed away earlier this year. His name was Raphael. He was 17.”

I did the math in my head. I was turning 17 in five years. I didn’t like that. I didn’t want to think about it.

“What was he like?” I asked.

Patricia got softer looking by the minute. I didn’t think it was possible, but she was melting like the wax on the candle. “He was such a scheduled little sweetheart. He woke up at 6 AM every day. Started schoolwork at 8. A smart, smart boy. Never did any of his assignments late. And he loved watching soap operas with me every day from one to three o’clock. Ghastly shows. But he had them all written in his head beforehand, and he was always right. They couldn’t pull one on him.”

“What school gets out early enough to watch TV at one o’clock? I want to go to that school.”

Patricia laughed, not wholeheartedly, but not weakly either. “He did public school online. He was going to get his college degree online too, in business administration.”

I had never heard someone say ‘business administration’ so tenderly, like she was reciting a love poem. Then she started crying, like real sobbing. Her eyes grew into fountains, overflowing until her cheeks flooded. Until she soaked her beloved red shawl. Until she was bursting at her seams. Her whole heart warm and throbbing on the linoleum floor.

She wailed into the night.

And there was something in the walls of the dimly lit church that wailed with her.

Chapter Ten

That night I dreamed that my parents found me in the church, stuffed me in a backpack, and carried me to our new one room apartment. I had to sleep on the concrete floor with no pillow or blanket. As my parents unpacked, they threw everything everywhere, piling shirt after shirt on me until I couldn't breathe. Somehow, Brooklyn, Ned, and Nika crept into the clothes avalanche just to laugh at me. I couldn't run away, because I was wearing my mom's business heels and they were wedged into the ground. I struggled and punched and kicked, but my body didn't move. Then Patricia's wailing cluttered my consciousness and added so much more pressure to my ears that I felt like I was going to—

Ouch. I woke up when I slammed my head against the hard pew. I had been sleeping on my backpack, but it had slipped off the smooth wood, and the contents were scattered all along the red carpet. I rubbed the back of my sore head. It was still dark out, but not the darkest. Still, I woke up before the sun did, and there was no way I was falling back to sleep on this stiff slab of a seat. Plus, the wind was coursing through the unprotected window, even more than the day before—so much so that on the table next to it, the tons of small candles created huge, moving shadows. *I do not like this wind!* I was shivering so much that my teeth were clattering.

I rolled onto my tummy and stretched until I could reach the two phones lying amongst my fallen items. I checked my own first:

WE NEED TO TALK TO YOU.

CALL US BACK. URGENT.

CALL US IMMEDIATELY, SAMANTHA.

Were they finally going to tell me they were moving? Psh, I already knew.

I'LL CALL YOU LATER. BUSY WITH SCHOOL.

I impulsively dropped my phone back on the floor. Thankfully, it hit my backpack, and I knew my phone was fine.

Time to check Brooklyn's phone. As always, she had a thousand group messages. I strolled through them sleepily, but even so early in the morning it made my heart beat faster. And faster. Waiting for them to slander me. I leaned so far into the phone until—

Thud.

I shrieked when I hit the floor.

“Samantha!” Patricia startled me. “What *is* the matter?”

“N-nothing. I'm fine.” I hopped back into the pew and mustered the most casual voice I could, even though now I was freezing and in pain. “What are you up to?”

Patricia came closer. She was still wearing her red shawl, which she held tightly around her body. Probably cold from the wind. “What is the matter, dear? What frightened you?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Why did you scream?” Her head tilted with concern.

“I-I just fell.” I tried to laugh to make it seem dumb, but it sounded like a croaking toad.

“I saw.” Patricia looked down at Brooklyn's phone, pausing to cough more heavily than she had the day before. “Who are you texting at this time in the morning?”

“Just... just my friends.” The word “friends” felt so bitter on my tongue. I couldn’t believe I called these half-humans my friends.

“You sound like you just woke up from a nightmare, sweetie.”

I shrugged. “I don’t remember what I dreamed about. I wasn’t sleeping too well.” At least it was partly true.

Patricia didn’t look like she bought it, but she didn’t go any further. Instead, she took the blanket that had fallen on the floor long ago, and she tucked it around me.

“Go back to sleep, sweet pea.”

I noted the bags beneath her eyes and her heaving chest. “You should go back to sleep, too, you know.”

“I wake up at this time every day to pray.”

“You pray a lot.”

“I have a lot to pray about.”

“Like what?” There was no way I was going back to sleep. Besides, it was about to get light outside, and the candles were still going anyway. How could I sleep with all this light?

“I’m trying to figure out a way to make an income. Support myself.”

“How will praying help?”

Patricia sat down next to me. I noticed her eyes were swollen from all the crying she did last night. “All I’ve learned in my decades as a Christian is God is never a silent God.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, glancing at Brooklyn’s blinking phone. “Do you hear a voice or something?”

“We find other ways.”

I didn’t know what she meant. I scrunched up my nose.

“Well, sweetie, by other ways I mean reading the Bible. Getting those gut feelings, those flashes through your conscience that can’t come from you. I know God’s voice. He knows mine.” For all the tiredness in her face, there was something else that put light in her.

“You sound like you’re talking about your best friend.”

“I am.”

“I’m not sure I like the idea of a best friend anymore. My only real best friend moved away. When I tried to make another one, it didn’t turn out so well. She was just too... anyway.”

“Was she mean to you?”

I never thought I’d start talking about this. But there was a weird bump in my hair from sleeping weird, and I was drowsy, and I just wanted to talk about it. I hesitated, but Patricia was patient. “Yeah,” I confirmed Patricia’s guess. “She was mean to me.”

“What did she do?”

I cupped my face with my blanket covered hands. “She hates me. She thinks I’m a loser.” Saying it out loud brought rushes of feelings through my body. I couldn’t name them.

“Oh, no! Why does she think that? You’re a dear.”

“I don’t know! She’s so dumb, and she made all her friends hate me too. She’s basically their ring leader. They’ll believe anything she says. No matter how crazy it is.” Beneath my blanket, I held my stomach, wondering if all her rumors were crazy, or if some were based on how squishy I was getting.

“What is she saying about you?”

I breathed out so heavily that I sounded like a horse. It was so embarrassing to say out loud. “She told everyone I was... pregnant. And someone who’s an even bigger loser is the... father.” My face distorted; I couldn’t see myself, but I bet I looked majorly green.

“That’s terrible! Oh, sweetheart.”

I buried my face in my blanket. “That’s why I left. I couldn’t take it.”

“What did you say?”

I lifted my head up, taking all the static from the blanket with me. “That’s why I had to leave. I just had to. But it only got worse when I left. Everyone thinks it only happened because of some Chinese black magic I used on Tommy—er, the ‘father’—and that I went to live with my ‘grandma’ in China. I don’t have a grandma in China. I don’t have *any* family in China, not that I know of. And my parents never let me believe in Santa. Why would I believe in black magic? *Why do they think I’m some sort of witch or something?*” If I was green with disgust before, I was starting to get red with anger. Almost as red as Patricia’s shawl. I could’ve torn holes in my blanket if my nails had been longer.

“That’s awful!” Patricia exclaimed. “That’s absolutely, absolutely racist.”

“It’s the worst! They’re the worst! They’ve ruined my life! Now I have no school! No home! I don’t have any friends, but that’s not new.” Flames were coming out of my nostrils.

“Oh, dear.”

“All I wanted was to go home. That’s all I wanted! Who knows. I probably don’t even have that home anymore. They probably put it up for foreclosure.”

Patricia raised her eyebrows.

“Is that not what ‘foreclosure’ means? I saw it on the door outside.” I shrugged my shoulders. “I’m not sure I believe what anyone says anymore.”

Patricia lowered her head. “I understand the feeling.”

I was about to boil over with angry tears, pummel everyone who’d been so mean to me.

“When I was in high school,” Patricia began like she was maneuvering into a booby-trapped parking space, pausing between each word like she was checking her mirrors. “Well, sweetie, a lot happened. My father and I had lost my mother to viral pneumonia, and I wasn’t dealing with it in the best of ways. Schools were just being integrated, and they had moved me to one in South Boston where they didn’t want me. You wouldn’t believe what the kids would say and do to us. Nasty, vile things. Things straight from the devil.”

I was practically ready to growl at these kids. I imagined them going down with everyone else on my list too.

Patricia shook her head like she was looking those same bullies in the eye. “I remember one time clearly,” she said. “You see, every day, they said things, did things, wouldn’t let us go

here or there or else we'd be beaten up. The tension, the protests, the sin. But this one time, it was just for me. I was in the bathroom washing my hands, and I couldn't stop."

I watched her turn her hands palm up, palm down. The cracks, deadened by over washing, were easy to see even in the dim light.

"I heard them talking. You see, my mom held onto my hand as she died, gripped onto me until she wasn't there anymore. I was trying to wash away the feeling, but I couldn't. These girls were talking, they started saying it was because I was trying to wash the black off my hands. I screamed and screamed and screamed at them. This was the day after we laid my mother to rest."

"Wow."

"Then I was suspended for two weeks."

"They suspended YOU!?"

Patricia nodded coolly. "They did."

"Were the other girls suspended too?"

"No. They said they were just joking around. One lied and said I shook her."

"No, no, no, no, no, they didn't. That's terrible. That's awful. That's, that's, that's! I hate it. I hate them. I wish they'd all just die."

"I felt similarly. They said many worse things to me. Eventually, I was trying to wash my hands of them too. I couldn't."

"What did you do?"

“I couldn’t do anything. I tried compensating, cleaned my whole house until it squeaked when anyone came in. My father couldn’t take it. He sent me to go clean a church in the area that was looking for help.” Patricia looked around the building. “This church. I worked here for months, only wanting to clean more and never able to do enough. But then this woman who had been my mother’s friend started telling me how Jesus could wash away all my sins, all my pain. No one who threatened me would prevail. And it hit me, and I believed. I could manage myself again.”

“Wow.” It was so much to process. “Is that why you came here after your son died?”

Patricia flinched. “You’re a perceptive young lady.”

“Well, has being here made you feel better?”

Patricia exhaled, and because of how the light hit the air, it looked like dust came out of her lungs. Years of thick dust. “It’s harder this time.”

“Why don’t you leave? I bet you can find a place. Are you sure you have no options?” I remembered the affordable housing pamphlet I saw in her purse.

Patricia gulped and coughed as a result. “I... don’t think so.”

“Maybe we could find something together!”

“I want to stay here.” Each word stood firmly.

Even under my blanket, I was cold. How had she lived here for months? “What if it’s not good enough for you to stay here? What if there’s better?”

She sighed. “I know, I know it’s not the best. But you’re helping make it better.”

I grinned. I had never heard that before. Maybe she was right. Maybe it was right for both of us to be here, even if it was freezing. “You’re making it better for me too.”

While I was thinking about how much I really believed what she said, how much I must really be helping her, the front door banged shut.

Chapter Eleven

I swung my body around, feeling specks of my fired-up energy splatter everywhere. I grabbed Patricia's arm, but she didn't like it. She shook me off.

"Don't be afraid," she assured me. "It's just a friend with poor timing."

"I almost couldn't close the front door in this wind, Mrs. Foster," bellowed a husky voice. "We won't be praying outside today?"

I could see the outline of an older man with a top hat and walking cane jaunt into the dim sanctuary. He acted like he'd had a good cup of coffee way too early in the morning. As he walked closer, writhing with pain, I saw that he was quite old and quite tan; his skin looked like the leather on my dad's favorite briefcase. His cane had a red cross protruding from the top.

Patricia smiled so wide she could've strained spaghetti with her teeth. "Good morning, Mr. Aguado. This is Samantha."

"How do you do, Samantha?" The man, evidently named Mr. Aguado, asked, tipping his hat toward me. I didn't know how to respond, but thankfully he turned his attention away from me. "Is this bad timing, Mrs. Foster?"

Patricia nodded both politely and assertively.

"I'll be on my way then. Shall I return?" Mr. Aguado leaned on his cane with both hands, which were covered in sunspots. If I could even see his sunspots in the low lighting, I could pick them out anywhere.

Patricia shook her head no, but I didn't agree at all.

“Why are you leaving in the first place?” I protested. “You should stay.” I found him quite interesting. Maybe I could tell him all about my house’s possible foreclosure like I told Patricia. Only this time I’d use a different word. It didn’t seem to hit the mark like I wanted it to.

“Well, in that case,” he said, taking off his hat and tilting his shiny, bald head toward Patricia. “What do you think, Pat?”

“Did you come for some business?” Patricia asked him.

He tweaked one thick eyebrow up. Funny how there was no hair on top of his head, but that was not the case for his face. A few grey strands protruded crookedly from his nostrils. “I believe I came for business, if I understand the question.”

“The room’s open, but I don’t think you’ll find anything wrong. Hasn’t seemed too bad lately, like it used to be.” was all Patricia said, and I didn’t like her vagueness at all.

Like it used to be? What used to be wrong?

“But the window boards aren’t doing too well. The one by the votive candles, as you see, is completely off, and I think another one might be falling off soon,” she added, scanning the room worriedly.

“Alrighty then. I’ll take a look at all of it. I’m afraid my joints aren’t doing the best today. Do you think this young lady here would lend a hand, or a knee in this case?” Mr. Aguado chuckled, tapping his knee cap with his cane. “I’m assuming you have less metal in you than I do. A few less years to accumulate it.”

Oh, I get to see what’s up. I shook my head emphatically. “I don’t even have braces, sir. I’d love to help.” I couldn’t wait to get the down low on who this man was.

Patricia gave Mr. Aguado an exasperated look.

“Oh, I’ll be fine, Patricia. You shouldn’t worry so much,” responded the man with the cane.

Patricia exhaled. “Well, it’s up to you, Mr. Aguado.”

He smiled at me. “Let’s go, kiddy!”

Yes, I’m in.

“You are going to learn a lot today, Samantha.”

But what I learned about was not as exciting as I thought it would be. Mr. Aguado was not a secret agent on “business”. I did, however, get some answers Patricia wouldn’t give me.

“So, you work for the city water?” I summarized what I had gathered as we looked at a funky old water boiler. There wasn’t anything wrong with it—it was just a tune up, he had said.

“Yes, indeed-y,” he said, starting to work on the machine. “I’m the best dressed one in the department, if I do say so myself.”

“So, what’s the big secret about? Patricia made it seem like you’re hiding a dead body.”

Mr. Aguado laughed. “Don’t say that too loudly. The cops are all around this place, waiting to tear it down. You’ll give them one more reason to watch us.”

“Then what’s the secret?”

“Now this is what you can’t tell anyone. You see, I didn’t turn off the water for this building when I was supposed to. I kept it on long before Pat ever got here.”

“Why did the church need water then?”

“There were others here before Pat. We took shifts.”

“How many others?”

“By the time Pat came, there were only two of us taking shifts.”

“Why did you two leave?”

Mr. Aguado sighed. “Both of us were reaching our limits being here. I had my first grandchild, the cutest little girl in the world, and I couldn’t stay nights anymore. The rest of our family is back in Brazil, so I’m the only one around to help my daughter.”

“How about the other one?”

“That was my friend Dorothy. She took the day shift, but she was getting too old. Her family took her back with them to Connecticut.”

“So, this church is only still here because of Pat.”

“Yes, indeed-y. But I wish it wasn’t.”

“What do you mean? Don’t you want to keep the church.”

“I certainly do. But it’s in no good condition for Pat. She’s had that cough for so long, and it’s only getting colder. It was different when it was summer. Now that it’s more time sensitive I’m hoping to convince her as soon as possible to move in with my daughter and I until she can save up rent, but she’s so set on staying.”

“You offered her to leave and she hasn’t taken it yet? Unbelievable.”

“It is. And in a few months, there’s a unit that might open up where I live—Number 77, how blessed. I’d pay for her to have it if I had the money. Ideally, she’d make the money by then and move in.”

“What’s blessed about the number 77?”

“Seven’s the number of completion in the Bible. I want her to be completely taken care of. I don’t want her to suffer anymore.”

Me neither.

Mr. Aguado glanced lovingly around the gross basement. “But I do love this building. Oh, indeed-y. Only reason I still keep the water on for her.”

Wow. “Could you get fired for keeping the water on for her?”

“Yup. I could lose my pension too. Not that it’s enough as it is. I wouldn’t have to keep working if it were enough.”

My parents would never risk their money for a church building, even if they loved it. They loved working, and they loved money.

“Why do you love this building?” I asked.

Mr. Aguado paused. “This church has been here for me since I first moved from Brazil. It’s one of the reasons I’m still here.” He wiped the wrench in his hand on a dirty rag. “It brought my daughter up. I want it to bring my granddaughter up too. If we can only find a pastor...”

“I hope you find one too.”

I sat there and watched him work, but I wasn't really watching him. I was mostly passing him tools or pointing his flashlight in different cobwebby corners. One of his tools had a little flame on it, and it reminded me of s'mores with Delilah. I really missed her.

"Say, Samantha," started Mr. Aguado. "How did you get here?"

What am I supposed to say to this? "I'm a friend of Patricia's. I needed a place to stay."

"How long will you be here for?"

"A while." *Forever.*

"How old are you?"

I paused. "How old do you think I am?"

He chuckled. "My daughter used to play this game years ago. 13?"

Oh, he thinks I'm a year older! Maybe I could stretch it just a little bit more... make this seem a bit less worrisome... I sighed dramatically and purposefully. "Everyone always thinks I'm so young! I'm 15."

"Are you really? My daughter always looked young for her age too."

I exhaled. *He believes me.* "How old is she now?"

"Oh, she is well into her thirties."

"Mm, yes, I see." *It's been a long time since she was my age.*

Mr. Aguado set down his torch and turned to me. He paused, almost like he didn't know what he was doing. I was sure he had realized I was barely a few months over twelve. But then

he asked, “Do you think you could hold the fort down here if Pat were to go fill out an application for a job? And start working if it goes well?”

This is not what I thought he was going to say. “You can get her a job?”

“There’s a position open in my office. I’d help her secure it if it was the last of me. She has to move out eventually, and this is the first step.” His voice was more somber than it had been all morning.

“How can this happen so quickly?”

“Maybe I’m a bit of an optimist, but as I prayed this morning I felt the timing was right.”

“But Patricia mentioned to me... that it’s impossible for her to... what’d she say... get a job without an address?”

“Anything is possible with the help of the Almighty. The minute she walks out of here, it will all fall into place. I just know it.”

I can’t believe Patricia had these opportunities all this time. Why wasn’t she taking them? I had to get her to take them. So, I told Mr. Aguado, “I have nowhere to be anyway. I want her to be OK. Better than OK. She deserves so much better.” I remembered what she had told me earlier, and I was burning inside. If staying here alone was what it would take to help her get back on her feet, it was a small sacrifice.

“Thank you, Samantha. Your arrival is quite the blessing for us. I’ll propose it to Pat later. Just promise you won’t live here as long as Pat has.”

“I’ll try.” What was I saying?

“If you mean a lot to Pat, you mean a lot to me. God has so much more for both of you.”

Does God have more for me? I barely knew this man, but he was more affectionate than my mom. “Are you and Patricia close?”

“I’ve known her since she was a teenager. She’s like a daughter to me.”

I wonder if I’ll become like a daughter to her.

We finished doing whatever it was we were getting done. Mr. Aguado went to go proposition Patricia, who was cleaning the foyer. I hung out in the kitchen, sitting on the table. As I swung my legs, I remembered Patricia’s story and how she couldn’t feel safe at school. My classmates were mean to me, but at least they couldn’t get *me* suspended for *their* bullying. At least they didn’t mock me for mourning. At least they weren’t going to physically hurt me. At least I was here now. And my parents were somewhere out there too.

Patricia stepped into the kitchen and gasped. “What in the world are you doing sitting on the table? Get off right now. That’s disgusting.”

I jumped off the table. “I’m sorry!” I squeaked.

Patricia looked like I had turned the wrong way onto a one-way street. She went to wipe down the table. “Please do not sit on tables. That is where our food goes.”

“I’m so, so sorry.” How embarrassing. I should’ve guessed she wouldn’t like it. Even my parents wouldn’t have let me do it at home, and we barely ever sat at tables to eat. The tables had nothing to be clean for.

“Just do not do it again,” she cautioned me as she cleaned up, giving me a weak smile.

For a minute neither of us talked, and I watched Patricia’s face go through many little emotions. Her mouth pulled to the corner of her face, her nose scrunched up, and her eyebrows

raised with vigor, gradually returning to normal. I thought I saw her lips twitching into a smile, but it was overcome by a grave expression as she asked, “Samantha, do you think you could stay here alone?”

“Of course.” *I already planned on it.*

Patricia’s eyes grew wide. “Then... I think I’ve made my decision.” She looked like she was swallowing all the air in the room. “Oh, Lord, help me... I must take Mr. Aguado up on his offer.”

This washed right over my feelings of being scolded. She was going to do it! She had a future. “I’m so happy for you, Patricia.” I would’ve hugged her if she looked a bit happier about this. “What made you decide to go?”

Patricia sighed. “When I prayed to God for wisdom, all I could think was ‘of course’. When I asked Mr. Aguado if he really believed I should go, he said ‘of course’. Before you said it yourself, ‘of course’ kept repeating in my mind. I so badly want to say no to this, but I feel increasingly that I cannot. I feel that I must.”

I mean I know you must. “It’s a good idea, Patricia.”

She finished wiping the counter and began the long process of washing her hands from the cleaning supplies. “It really doesn’t bother you if I leave you here? You’re OK with holding up the fort by yourself? Might be best to stay in the sanctuary, as to make your presence known. That’s where I try to be in the day.”

“Yes, ma’am, I am A-OK with it.” I nodded adamantly, even though she wasn’t looking at me.

“But don’t go too near to the windows. It’s too cold by them anyway, but if they see you’re a kid here all alone... I don’t know what they’ll do.”

“Oh, yeah, that sounds best. Indeed-y.”

“Indeed-y?” she repeated, with a new lightness to her voice. “Only one morning with Mr. Aguado, and he’s got you saying his favorite word. Good thing he’s going with me today.”

“Do you think it’s a good thing that you’re going with him?”

Patricia finally finished washing her hands and turned around. Still shiny and wet but not dripping, her hands looked more worn than they had before. She let them hang in the air as if she were holding them open for someone, and I could’ve sworn the space around them was glowing.

“I think it will be a good thing,” she answered me. I could tell it took a lot of work to get the words out of her mouth. Like maybe it didn’t feel so simple in her heart. She began hacking, filling the room with vibrations. When she stopped, she repeated herself. “It will be good.”

“You think so?”

“I really hope so.” She paused. “I know Mr. Aguado wants me to move out with the money I might make. But I won’t. I’ll just use the money for food and maybe some new window boards.”

Oh, no, Patricia. That’s not what’s best for you. But I didn’t say anything.

Before she left with Mr. Aguado, she poured dry cereal for us—it was the healthy kind with oats. Had to store up energy for the day ahead. We all sat formally at the table in the kitchen—nothing to say. Finishing his cereal, Mr. Aguado rose to check all the pipes in the kitchen. He looked forlornly at the fridge.

“I wish you could’ve had electricity all this time, Pat.”

I can't believe Patricia's been here without electricity. And will she have heat when in the winter? Will I have heat? I don't know how all this works. Why aren't we both leaving? Am I going to be one of the kids freezing on the side of the street? No, Patricia and I will figure it out.

“I don’t think I’ll have time to check all the windows today,” said Mr. Aguado. “But I’ll see if I can temporarily prop the board that fell back up, so it’ll keep the wind out for Sam until I can permanently fix it. Leave in about five, Pat?”

Patricia nodded, weariness clouding her eyes.

As Mr. Aguado went up to the sanctuary, Patricia looked me square in the eyes, like she was trying to be stern but was a bit too soft.

“Sam, you must take this very seriously. I plan on living here for a long time.”

I nodded gravely. “Of course.”

“Remember to switch out the candles when they get too low, make sure the door is locked when we leave...” she instructed, and then continued to roll off more reminders. I wasn’t sure I could keep them all in my head, but they made sense. I could do this. I had to do it.

When I stood at the door to wave goodbye, there was something in the way Mr. Aguado tipped his hat to me, and in the way Patricia’s eye darted around before she walked out, that made me feel like they were trusting me with a lot. Even though Mr. Aguado wanted Patricia to leave, he still loved the church. And Patricia said she would keep living here, even with money. I locked the door as tightly as I could in their absence. I had to press it hard against the wind.

And then I was alone. I knew what it was like to be alone, but this time was different: I had a purpose. I checked all the windows, monitored the candles—a few on the altar in the sanctuary were a little bit low, but not low enough to change them. I even did some light dusting, until I realized Patricia probably had higher standards than I could deliver. Besides, I couldn't find any more dust after two minutes.

When the little sleep I had gotten started to catch up to me, I lay down on the red carpet behind the altar and traced the wood framing on the ceiling with my eyes. It still looked like the bottom of a ship, like it had when I first saw it. I felt like I was in a boat swaying, falling asleep in the chilly sea breeze.

The whirring of a cop car and the skidding of its tires chased my droopy eyelids. I half-consciously took note that I was beginning to dream, but as the disconcerting noises heightened like the scales of Beijing opera, I knew I wasn't near asleep enough for the intensity. Like coils and release, I sprung awake. My only defense was my body, my presence keeping this church alive, so I vaulted to the front door. Made sure to stand properly in front of it, propped against it, ready to slam my body against anyone on the other side.

But in my sleepy, on-guard stupor, the cop cacophony withdrew. My arms fell to my sides; I leaned away from the doorframe. False alarm. Cops were all over Cambridge. I don't know why I was so convinced they had to be coming for me. *Just settle down, Sam.*

Brooklyn's phone had a new message. I snatched it from the ground and leaned back on a pew. If any of our teachers knew how much these kids texted in class, they'd kick them out. It was Nika sending an SOS for test answers. My mom would yell at me if I cheated on anything. And with so much proof left behind!

The low battery light came on. Uh, oh. I didn't bring my charger. I dropped the phone to keep myself from wasting the battery. I didn't need to know the answers to the map quiz. I was never going to go to school again anyway, as far as I could see.

I'll just check my phone instead. So, I picked up my phone, saw the battery was also not doing so hot, and dropped it right next to Brooklyn's. *Oops, can't do anything about that.*

For a few hours, I convinced myself it didn't matter. I didn't need them.

But there was nothing like the light of a new message. And another one. Around lunch time they came catapulting in. *What's the worst that could happen if you just peak?* But as soon as I picked my phone up, I cringed. My mom was texting me:

SAMANTHA, WHY ARE YOU NOT CALLING YOUR FATHER.

My stomach churned. I tried not to feel, tried to remember that I wasn't calling my parents so that I could help Patricia. That even if that wasn't my original intention, it was now. But my mom's next text was hard to avoid:

I AM VERY DISAPPOINTED IN YOU.

Oh, OK. I retracted my stretched-out legs, made them take up as little space as possible, strapped them to my chest. I could feel my whole body—each limb stiffening, my shoulders drooping, my bones turning to paper. I felt like an origami crane that my mom could crush.

OUR FATHER AND I NEED TO SPEAK TO YOU.

I never wanted to speak to them again. I looked at the texts, scrolling up and down, letting the word 'disappointed' take things out of me again and again, draining me again and again. The whole church and this whole mission didn't feel so honorable anymore. I felt dirty. If

my mom was disappointed in me over not calling and leaving when I wasn't supposed to, she'd be totally ashamed of me for lying to her. For running away from my problems. For doing the exact things she scorned every day. I was one of those giver-uppers. I was the miscreant. And it was true. I had failed my mom.

And then my mom *called* me. I stared at the caller ID. I could see her lying on the couch in her 80s jacket. Her hair all messy. But her determination to correct, to prove wrong would be back—that hard set look on her face that I never wanted to be directed at me. I was about to barf.

I declined the call. There was no way I was pressing answer. There was no way I was watching it ring. Besides that, my battery was abysmally low.

IF YOU DO NOT CALL BACK THIS MINUTE, I AM COMING TO YOUR SCHOOL RIGHT NOW TO TALK TO YOU.

This caught my breath. Caught it like a rabbit by the ears. I couldn't move.

What am I supposed to do? She'll go to school and find out there if I don't call her. They'll hunt me down and throw Patricia in jail for keeping me as a runaway. Just call her, Sam. Just call her already!

I didn't look when I pressed dial.

“Samantha Mercier Lee, your father told me that you directly disobeyed his order to stay home. Then you refused to answer his calls. You sparingly answered his texts. You have been entirely disrespectful.”

I sighed but made sure she couldn't hear it through the phone. She had no idea how truly disrespectful I was being.

“I’m beginning to think you’re hiding things from us,” my mom informed me, as if she had at last caught on to the truth. I clenched my jaw. There’s no way she knew I had moved into an abandoned church.

“I will not tolerate this from you,” she continued spewing all she probably thought my father hadn’t been brave enough to say himself. “You are our daughter, and you will respect us, call us, and do as we say, understand? And you will tell us before running away from school and running back to school.”

No. This was not coming from my parents who were moving without telling me. Not from my mom who wouldn’t even tell me what made her sick to the point of bedrest. And she was definitely not going to ruin Patricia’s life by forcing me to leave this church. All of this spun inside of me, little tornadoes forming in my gut. I was gonna say it. I was gonna say it. I began to.

“Mom, you know what? You don’t communicate with me! You don’t tell me things! How about tell me that we’re moving? Huh? As if I’m not home just as often as you are! As if I’m not really your daughter! Is that why you shipped me off to boarding school, huh? *Barely a half hour from home.* Next time you ask me to do better, why don’t you do better yourself.”

I had never been so honest with my mom. Finally, she was getting what she deserved. She’d have to take it. She didn’t have any other daughter as a backup. I waited. No one ever stood up to her. Now, I had scared her quiet. I had never heard her so quiet in my life. OK, this was getting weird. What if I made her faint or something? What had I done!

“Mom, just answer me! I didn’t mean it! I promise I didn’t!” I sobbed. My cheek melted into the phone. “Just answer me.”

There was no ring tone. I checked my phone screen to see if she was still there.

It was black. My phone had died before I heard what she said. I banged it with all I could, trying to punch out the last of its battery. Pressed every button a thousand times. Took out the battery and put it back in. Nothing. It was drained dry.

And my charger was at school. My back up charger was at home.

Maybe it was a sign to just let her fume in my disrespect. Whether she thought I hung up on her or she heard my rant, I knew she'd be fuming. But what if she acted on it. *What if she's driving to my school right now?*

It was all falling on my head.

Chapter Twelve

I need to call my mom back! No question. I thought through my options. Maybe Patricia had a phone—but I had already looked through most of her stuff. In my panic, Brooklyn’s hot pink phone flashed in my eyes. *Of course, you dummy!* But then I realized I had no idea what my mom’s number was.

What if I intercepted her! I’d catch her right at the entrance. If I told her I didn’t want to be embarrassed to be found on campus with her, her social paranoia would kick in, and we wouldn’t have to go far enough in for anyone to see me. It was a perfect plan.

But I’d have to leave the church. *Patricia might never know! You can pull this off, Sam!* Besides, the candles were still a sign of habitation.

It took all my strength to pull the church door shut against the wind. When I finally did, I heard a bang from the inside of the church. Ripping the door back open to check, I saw that the window board Mr. Aguado had propped up had fallen once more. *He’ll pick it up later. Just get out of here.*

Then, running into the wind itself, I bolted through the same neighborhoods I had before, but this time I didn’t have time to care about the judgmental onlookers—didn’t have time to watch for the eyes peeking out through bent blinds, following me. With each street, the houses grew further apart. The number of people I bumped into grew less and less. The changing blur around me increased my anxiety, reminded me how close I was going to the kids who hated me and to the adults who would want to punish me, if they only knew. But Patricia was the only person I thought should rightfully punish me, since I left her home vulnerable.

Finally, the steel bars! My stomach gurgled as I entered RISE Academy, making sure no one was around me. Eyes on the road, I sat in front of the steel statue and waited—just like a spy. My mom would get here any minute now.

A few minutes passed, and I grew both cold and suspicious. What was she doing? I strained my eyes to see further down the road but saw nothing. Timidly, I turned around and peeked in between the steel bars. My heart raced. Her car was parked down by the first building, where the headmaster worked.

I broke Patricia's trust for nothing.

Everyone knew I had been missing. My mom, my dad, my school. Everyone had to know by now. Nowhere was safe anymore.

I took off as fast as I could back to the church. *Stupid, Sam, this was so stupid. You're so stupid.* I was probably about to cry, but it was so, so windy out, and it slapped the water in my eyes dry. I still couldn't believe I had decided to save myself—not even doing it well—instead of sticking to my mission.

My stomach curled with anxiety as the church steeple came into view, but from the distance, nothing seemed wrong. I didn't hear or see any cops. *At least Patricia still has a home. No thanks to my help.*

But maybe I can help in some other way! My case was pretty hopeless. I was sure my parents would find me soon enough—I knew they'd send out a search party soon. But with the little time I had left, I could give something back to Patricia. This thought became my new mission. How could I help her?

I thought about Patricia, who she was, and what she needed. That's how my dad told me he thought about his clients. It hadn't failed him yet. I thought about getting her a bank account, a cell phone, and a new house, but these did not fall under my capabilities. Then, her worked-to-the-bone hands engraved themselves in my mind's eye. *I could buy her lotion!*

I went straight to the thick of Central Square. If nothing had happened while I ran almost to my school, it seemed pretty safe to go to the stores down the street. And maybe I could find myself a charger. Then I could possibly keep my parents from finding me for a little longer—lead them the wrong way. At least they wouldn't think I died. Also, how else could I keep up with Brooklyn's group chats?

I scurried across the street and into the lines of shops. *Where to go? Where to go?* There were way too many restaurants and bars on this street. Way too many banks. Way too many buildings that were useless to me.

Near the antique store, I saw a homeless man hovering, mumbling his worries to the abandoned store window. He wasn't even the same man I saw there the day before. My heart broke. I didn't want that to be Patricia. *Or me.* I put more oil in my step.

Gilbert's Great Gifts! I could go there—the lotion was a gift for Patricia, and I saw they had gadgets before. The chimes on the door did a jive with my frantic entrance. I swear my heart stopped. The man behind the counter had a top hat just like Mr. Aguado.

"Everything doing alright, little lady?" the man asked, probably addressing the fact that I looked like I had seen a well-dressed ghost.

After a pause that was a little too long to be considered polite, I assured him, "I'm totally fine." Then I remembered all the lessons my mom had taught me about asking for help when you

needed to find something, because it was so much faster than when my dad just ignorantly bobbed around a store. I added with a peak of hope catching my voice, “Do you by any chance sell any lotion?”

“We do have some luxury lotion sets around the corner here. Would you like a look? Our scents range from lavender for a more classic smell to more untraditional scents like rosemary.”

I went with him to consider my options. There were almost twenty of them!

“Our cherry blossom scent is on special display this week,” he informed me as he swiped a sample on a small popsicle-stick type thing.

Ew, smells like Brooklyn. Take it away before I gag. “That’s alright. Any others?”

He stroked his brown bushy beard. He was much paler and even hairier than Mr. Aguado. As he grabbed another sample, hair even stuck out from his sleeve. “All of our customers adore this floral-citrus mix: rose, lavender, and lemon.”

Is this lotion or air freshener? Patricia might like it, but I sure do not want to smell it on her. “Do you happen to have any that are less—floral?”

“I have a scent that may be perfectly suitable for you.” I couldn’t place his accent, but he wasn’t from Boston for sure. “How do you like our wonderful, if I do say so myself, rendition of sandalwood? It is particularly woody.”

This one smells like the church pews but with a bit extra punch. Good job, Mr. Beard.

“I’ll take that one.”

The man grabbed it for me to ring up. As he scanned the lotion set—a fancy box with white paisley—I asked, “Do you happen to have any phone chargers too? I’m in desperate need of some battery.”

“Desperate need!” he exclaimed, glancing at the gadgets near the store window. “I regret to inform you we do not.”

Uh oh! “Do you know where I would be able to find one?”

He stroked his beard again. “I am not certain that I do. Not around here at least.”

If frustration had a picture next to it in the dictionary it would be a dead phone. I slumped so much I might’ve lost two inches just standing there. *Say goodbye to the digital world.*

He looked mightily concerned. “You seem to be a bit out of sorts. Did you need a phone with which to call someone?”

I perked up at his suggestion, but my shoulders slumped right after. “Thanks for your offer,” I said through a forced smile. “But I don’t remember my mom’s phone number.”

He rose his eyebrows as if he became even more concerned. “That is a predicament you have there.”

“Well, thanks again!” I spouted, getting impatient with my time (it wasn’t really my time anyway—it was Patricia’s I was playing with). I gave him my charge to swipe, and taking the lotion, spun around to leave.

“Wait! Would you like to borrow my own charger for a while? Feel free to browse the store while you wait. Then perhaps you can call your mother.”

I did the math in my head. It would take six hours to charge both phones. I couldn't possibly leave the church for that long. Patricia would be back before then, and that would be egregiously irresponsible.

But my mom was probably on the edge of reporting my kidnapping. And the lies Brooklyn could have been spreading about me! I had to know. Besides, I could always charge them both halfway.

Before I knew it, I nodded, as if there was no other offer I would want to accept. "That's so nice of you! I'd love to do just that."

I plugged in my phone first and left it behind the desk. Lotion in hand, I went to explore the store, taking interest in the shelf of books nearby—an orange and green cover was facing outward. "Gilbert's pick: *To Kill a Mockingbird*," read a small paper label. We had started off the school year reading this in class. I didn't really read all of it then, but it wasn't the worst. Plus, the author had one of my last names. She couldn't be that bad. *If I'm never going to school again, I have to educate myself somehow.*

I propped the book on the box of lotion and flipped to the last pages. I liked to start at the end when I read, because it made me feel like I'd been through a lot even when I hadn't. Oh, one of the character's names was Boo! I remembered my class talking about that. I liked his name. He seemed a little bit gross. I didn't like that, and I didn't know why he was petting this random boy. What a creep. And he couldn't even go home alone. Then he was gone for good. Well, that was a weird character, and it made the main character, whatever her name was, sad that she didn't do anything for him. That made me sad. But I did things for people.

You're definitely doing something great for Patricia right now, you dummy. I told myself to shut up. I didn't need that kind of negativity in my life. We all have to do things sometimes that aren't the best. Plus, I got her a luxury lotion set.

Ignoring the stabs of guilt, I kept reading.

Scout, oh, yes, that was her name. She was falling asleep while her dad read to her. I hadn't done that in years. I missed the bedtime stories my dad used to tell me. I'd probably never sleep in my old bed again, let alone hear a bedtime story. I did not like that thought. *Just keep reading.*

Scout was trying to convince her dad she hadn't fallen asleep, so she told him that the guy they thought was the villain in the story was actually "real nice". And her dad replied, "Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them." I did not agree with that. No way could Brooklyn ever be nice. She was born hating anyone not like her. I hated people who weren't nice.

What you're doing to Patricia isn't very nice. I gulped. This was not a friendly thought. The book suddenly ended, and there was nothing to distract me from the guilt. *Never start a book from the ending ever again.*

I slammed the book back into the shelf. Thankfully, it was a paperback, and it didn't make much noise. Mr. Beard over at the counter wasn't looking anyway. Phew. At least I didn't have to read it anymore.

Not thinking about it doesn't make it any less selfish. I cringed. OK, my conscience was right. I was the worst. I hated myself.

I stood awkwardly in the aisle, clenching the lotion set—I was like a log that was trying to grow legs and walk. I didn't want to have to go talk to Mr. Bearded Man and tell him that his generosity wasn't going to be appreciated today. *That may not be polite, but it's better to be loyal to someone you love than to smile at a stranger while you use your loved one as a footstool.*

Who said that? Someone said that once.

And they were right. I had to fix this. I stuffed the lotion in my backpack and marched right up to the counter to unplug my phone. Giving a misshapen smile to the Bearded Man, I said, "I really appreciate your offer to use your phone charger, sir. Sadly, I am not where I am supposed to be. At all. But thank you again." I nodded as if I had checked off this encounter with my chin.

The man's beard lifted with his smile. "The place we should be is where we should go. Go on now." He waved to me with the cast on his wrist. I wondered where he had been to do that. Was he where he should have been? But I jumped out the door too quickly for answers.

My flailing arms beat the cold windy air as I pummeled through it. Nothing could stop me now. I had one mission. I had to complete it. Someone yelled at me in a ratty voice, "Watch where you're going!" So, I yelled back, "I'm going exactly where I should go!"

I could see the top of St. Paul's church extending like a tent into Heaven. But now it wasn't just anyone's tent. It was Patricia's, and it was mine. It had saved us both. I imagined the victory of setting my stakes in it once more, just as Patricia and Mr. Aguado had told me to. I could hold up the fort for as long as they wanted. I would be in their service.

But there was something in the wind that smelled chalky as I got closer to the church. Sirens rang with warning. *They must've saw it was left empty!* Guilt crimped my core—hot pressed by my own mistake. My own doing. My own decision.

Police officers barricaded the street, keeping me from going any farther. Firefighters swarmed the church that seemed like a castle on a cloud—

Except it was a cloud of smoke. And St. Paul's was on fire.

The smoke snaked through the boards of the broken windows. The dark grey serpents rose surreptitiously from any crevice they could, and they finished their paths by strangling the white clouds. There was something in the way violence infringed upon the building that made it feel like it was mocking me. It was mocking Patricia.

“The candles!” I screamed. “I left the—” I slapped my mouth shut. *I did this. This is my fault. This is all my fault. I burned down the church. I burned down Patricia's home. The place I was supposed to call home.*

The sky around me was spinning. Or maybe that was me. The ground wasn't so steady either. I fell over and crashed into the concrete.

Epilogue

When my parents and I moved in with my dad's relatives in Quincy for a "temporary" stay, it lasted a long time. My parents had both lost their jobs in the "frantic economy", as my mom eventually began talking about it. Bitterness crept into everything she said. She wasn't sick. I did learn, however, that the job loss had physical effects and had resulted in fatigue and many other fancy words my mom used to rationalize her response. My dad just nodded.

"You should've told me you were moving," I off-handedly commented a few months into our stay at my aunt and uncle's.

My mom felt my accusation right away. I could see it in the way her eyes flashed.

My dad, however, spoke carefully, "We just didn't want to stress you out, Sammy."

All the worry they caused me flooded to the tip of my tongue. *Stop, Sam. Didn't you worry them too? Forgive them like they forgave you.* "OK," I agreed out loud.

"What's OK?" asked my dad.

"It's just OK."

"Have you done your homework, Sam?" said my mom, brandishing her laptop screen which was made up of tabs and tabs of job searches. "I'm doing mine." Her hands shook while she held the computer up, her hair protruding in every which way—less blonde than I had ever seen it. It seemed to fade with each day.

For a while I faded too. I faded into the bleak hallways of the local public school. I faded into my aunt and uncle's conversations about having kids, because I was a real-life example of

all the stress a child could cause a parent. My aunt didn't know I was around the wallpapered corner to hear that point.

During the fire, a police officer had seen me fall to the ground and somehow figured out I was on the missing child list. When I saw my parents, I didn't know how to feel. I was angry at them, but they were hugging me and still loved me, and I felt guilty. I knew I had done to them what I had done to Patricia and Mr. Aguado.

As I waited for my parents to be questioned at the police station, I heard a few officers talking about St. Paul's burning.

"Do you remember the crazy woman who was living there?" a bald male police officer mentioned, slouching at his messy desk.

"Tell me about it. After they finally got out the fire today, I found her running frantically outside the church, eyes darting around like a maniac," recounted a female police officer with skin the color of crushed peanuts. "She kept saying something about a guy named Sam. 'Where is Sam? Sam!? Sam!?' What was I supposed to tell her—Sam doesn't exist?"

Oh, my gosh. Patricia thinks I died in the fire!

"Have they brought her in for questioning yet? She could be liable for arson."

Questioning? Liable for arson? I felt queasy. She thinks I'm dead, and she's going to jail for something I did.

"They already questioned her. They determined she's crazy—surprise, surprise—but not crazy enough to burn down her own housing on purpose. She has a strong alibi that she wasn't

there when the fire caught—she was filling out an application at the city water department. The fire was probably a mistake.”

Thank You, God. She’s not going to jail.

“Do they get her in contact with a shelter?” the man asked.

“They tried to,” explained the woman. “But she said she was going to stay with a friend.”

She’s going to stay with Mr. Aguado!

“I personally don’t know why they let her go,” the woman continued. “She doesn’t seem stable enough.”

She doesn’t seem stable enough? What does that mean? I wanted the officers to say more, and I almost asked them, but my parents returned. They finished their questioning—totally cleared of any suspicion. Of course. My mom could talk her way out of anything, even while she was half as confident as normal.

Over the next few months, I tumbled through my feelings all by myself without any new information. *This is all your fault, Sam! Patricia is freaking out because of you. But maybe it was good for her to get out of that run-down building. And Mr. Aguado is probably taking care of her. But you’re not. You need to make it up to her. Apologize to her. Honestly, Sam, you need to tell her you’re OK. Think about the stress you’ve put her under!*

But how was I going to tell her I was alive when I had no idea where she was? I searched her name online, but the only records were from when she lived in Framingham.

Then I realized that I knew a lot more about Mr. Aguado, and if I could find him, I could find Patricia. During one particularly boring geography class in the middle of January, I went

through Mr. Aguado's information in my head—that he worked where they supplied Cambridge's water and that he lived in an apartment. Oh, and that Patricia had a pamphlet on affordable housing that had to be from him, and he had mentioned an open unit—number 77. All this had to be connected.

So, when I got home after school, I camped on the beige leather sofa and set out to match the info I had with online records. I found that Mr. Aguado had an address that was in an affordable housing complex near his job. It had to be him! 1872 Calmer Ave, Cambridge, MA, Unit #73. I wanted Patricia to be calm. I hope she lived there with him. It was over an hour away on the Red Line from my middle school, and it was dark right after school in the winter, but I had to see if she was OK. I told my parents I had an Outdoor Club event. The club did not exist, but I was going outdoors.

The train car was so crowded I had to hug the luxury lotion set in my arms the whole ride, and I squished my backpack against the seat so much that a textbook stuck into me. At least I could smell the sandalwood surrounding the white paisley box. *You can do it, Sam. Just a little bit longer.*

I rehearsed speech after speech in my head. *Hi, it's me. I'm alive. Please don't be worried. I'm so sorry I've let you be worried. But I got you this lotion to make it up for you.*

I imagined Patricia smiling at me and how thoughtful I was to get her sandalwood lotion. *Wait, Sam, this is not about you.*

So, how was I supposed to make this not about me? I didn't know what to do.

When I left the train station, I didn't believe I was in a city anymore. The streets were definitely more for cars than pedestrians—they were so narrow, and I couldn't cross the street

anytime I wanted. But at least the headlights and streetlights helped me see where I was going, since it was already dark out. *How are you even going to see know if Patricia is there at this time of day! What were you thinking!*

Worried that neither Mr. Aguado nor Patricia would be there, I began praying. *God, just let me see Patricia again. Somehow. How else will she know I'm OK?* Pulling my fluffy red jacket closer to my body, I kept walking.

I imagined Patricia playing with Mr. Aguado's granddaughter every day. With her lullaby voice, she wouldn't even have to sing for the baby to go to sleep. Or maybe she rejected Mr. Aguado's offer. What if she were wandering around where St. Paul's used to be, unable to fully leave? *No, Sam, don't think about that. You don't know anything yet.*

Finally, I turned onto Calmer Ave. Square apartments lined the street. With grey metal for siding, they looked like prison wards, except there were lights on and multicolored curtains instead of steel bars. Families sat down to eat dinner. Couples lounged on couches. There was life here, even if it wasn't fancy. Plus, the windows looked insulated, and that's what I wanted for Patricia.

God, now's the time. Show me Patricia. The units in front of me were in the 50s, which meant that not too far off would be... I approached a building that listed 73 and 77 as two of its units. I caught my breath in my throat. Fumbling backwards, I looked up to see if any windows would let me see in.

I saw Patricia rocking a baby on the second story. She was wearing a red long sleeve shirt instead of her shawl, and she looked fuller—in her eyes, in her stature. Or maybe I was dreaming it, because she was so far away but so close. No, it was real. She had moved on with her life.

You can move on too, Sam. Suddenly, I knew what I had to do. Rubbing my hands for warmth, I sat down on a bench next to the apartment building. I reverently put the luxury lotion set in my backpack and took out a piece of paper and pen instead. Using my best penmanship possible, I wrote:

Dear Patricia,

It's Samantha. I don't want to bother you, but I just want to tell you that you don't have to worry about me. I'm safe, and I left before the fire. I'm sorry I didn't keep my promise to stay in the church. I hope you can forgive me. If you do forgive me and want to know how I am, I'm living with my family in Quincy now at 217 Prospect St.

I'm praying for you like you did for me.

Love,

Samantha

God, I hope this makes her feel better. I tugged the first glass door of the apartment building open, and the warm air filled me to the brim. *She has heat.* I tried the next glass door, but it was locked. *Good, she's safe.* Turning to my right, I saw a wall lined with bronze mailboxes marked by unit number. I folded my letter, blessed it, and slipped it into box #73. Maybe one day I could write a letter and place it in #77. *God, I hope so.*

I caught the next train to Quincy, and I went home.

I prayed for Patricia every day. That she got that job, that she moved into her own apartment, and that she found all the joy in the world.

I think she must've been praying for me too. A month after I left her the letter, I found another friend. Her name was Carmen, and she loved to paint her nails red, so she wouldn't bite them off. "But sometimes they look like jelly beans, and I bite them anyway," she'd say.

Because I didn't want to give my aunt and uncle the gratification of judging us as we hung out, we went to her apartment after school. Her parents worked late, so it would just be us. We made forts out of hole-y felt blankets in her living room—piled them so high the top of our best one almost touched the ceiling.

"I feel like I'm camping," Carmen exclaimed, lying on the blanket-covered carpet. The only light was a toy lantern in between us, and her thick brown hair looked black in the dim glow. The lighting mimicked that of the church when the candles were still standing and illuminating. When Patricia made me dinner in the basement kitchen.

"Let's get a real tent and go real camping," I spurted. Maybe the night sky in all its sparkly grandeur would look like the church too.

As memories lit up my mind, I let them fall from my mouth. For the first time, I told someone everything that happened in the church. Even that I was the one who brought it down in flames. For the first time, I felt like I wasn't alone when I saw the fire.

"Wow," she mouthed, amazement lighting up her eyes.

"Yeah. Wow. That's how I felt too." I could breathe more lightly than I had been able to in months. It was as if the fumes had finally escaped.

Holding a red blanket around me like a sleeping bag, I whispered, "I just hope I get to see Patricia again."

“I think you will,” Carmen said, catching hope in her mouth.

I closed my eyes, and I felt like I could hear Patricia’s gentle voice once more, smooth like a lullaby. “I think so too.”

And underneath the towering blankets, we fell asleep.